

YOKO ONO: TRANSNATIONAL ARTIST IN A WORLD OF STICKINESS

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Contents

Introduction	Yoko Ono, Transnational Artist in a World of Stickiness	2
Chapter One	Japanese in America, American in Japan	22
Chapter Two	Pay Attention, Play, & Dismantle	45
Chapter Three	<i>Communitas</i> in Transnationalism	69
Conclusion		92
List of Illustrations		97
Works Cited		98

Introduction

Yoko Ono: Transnational Artist in a World of Stickiness

Drinking Piece for Orchestra

Imagine letting a goldfish swim across the sky.

Let it swim from the West to the East.

Drink a liter of water.

Imagine letting a goldfish swim across the sky.

Let it swim from the East to the West.

1963 spring

This paper explores the role of transnationalism in the life and work of Yoko Ono, from 1954 to 1967. I argue that Ono's hybrid Japanese and American identity affected the acceptance of her person within the New York based branch of the avant-garde art group Fluxus, and affected the reception of her work in Japan. I go on to show how Ono draws specifically on these dual sources to construct many of her works, and how some of these pieces also helped elaborate the concept of *communitas* by changing the perception of her audience participants. Finally, I argue that Ono's works become part of the Fluxus repertoire that fulfills at least some members' agenda of subverting national borders.

Fluxus: an Introduction

September, 1962. In Wiesbaden, West Germany, a group of artists under the organization of a Lithuanian born U.S. citizen, George Maciunas, came together to perform at the first ever Flux Fest. Originally conceived as a way to generate seed money for the publication of an avant-garde art magazine, the performance based festivals became key sites for the realization of creative works generated by the far-flung members of a loose collective, gathered under the name “Fluxus.”

Working throughout the 1960's, Fluxus artists in the United States operated in a culture that was “terrifically confused, interesting and anxious” in which artists’ works turned toward the ephemeral in an attempt to stay ahead of an “art public desperately eager to absorb every new advance” (Howard 14). An interest in democratic culture and the constant production and consumption of ephemera by the culture at large was also present in several strains of art being created during this time. Historian Gerald Howard writes that “[t]he lure of the surface, the temporary, the throwaway was the essence of the Pop Art created by Warhol, James Rosenquist, Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine, Tom Wesselmann and others – they transformed ...[material] ephemera into art and sometimes their art *aspired* to be ephemeral, as with “happenings” [performed by avant-garde artists like Allan Kaprow]” (16). Fluxus members created ephemeral works by making objects out of cheap, readily available, mass produced goods like plastic pill boxes, paper, and test tubes or by simply performing their works and not creating an object at all. Like many other artists in the beginning of the 1960's, Fluxus artists were interested in the boundaries

between art and life and new forms of art like performance and art objects made in multiples.

This use of ephemera was a celebration of everyday life, as opposed to the aggrandizement of the “heroic” artist that occurred with the rise of Abstract Expressionism. Commenting on the refusal of Fluxus artists to accept American Abstractionism as an “American triumph,” Fluxus artist and historian Ken Friedman writes that “[it] is the other tradition [of the avant-garde – Dada or the Surrealists, for example,] that influenced Fluxus, a tradition that has inevitably been neglected because it is antinationalistic in sentiment and tone and practiced by artists who are not easily used as national flag-bearers” (242). Despite both scholars’ and Fluxus artists’ frequent descriptions of the loose collective as subverting the dominant social paradigm, refusing the nationalistic overtones heard even in the art world of the 1950s and 1960s, many members displayed a cosmopolitan attitude firmly embedded in a Euro-American centered ideology of democracy and capitalism.

Fluxus was both transnational and cosmopolitan. By transnational, I mean that the ideas and lives of Fluxus artists from the United States, Western European countries, as well as Japan interacted in a conceptual space that lacked geographic boundaries. Yet, despite the groups ability to work in this transnational space, they were still limited by their physical geography. While striving to be, and articulating themselves as, transnational, Fluxus artists were also cosmopolitan. Though claiming to be citizens of the world, the group operated only in westernized, democratized, industrialized countries. They did not operate in the geo-political periphery, that is,

there were no members from Africa, South America, or most of Asia. While claiming to be world citizens, the group could not venture beyond the political, and therefore geographic, boundaries delimited during this Cold War era. The use of both the terms transnational and cosmopolitan stems from dissonance in the groups goals and how they generally operated. Fluxus members desired to be, and saw themselves as transnational, yet generally operated out of a cosmopolitan frame. They attempted to make people conscious of national borders, to sharpen people's perception, in order to then transgress those limits through a shift in perception, yet simultaneously the group itself did not recognize its own geopolitical boundaries.

Though the transnationalism of the Fluxus group took on cosmopolitan overtones, there was also a sincere desire among many to undermine or at least bring to attention, the perceived differences and dangerous tensions among people generated by an insistence on nationalism. This nationalism stands in contrast to the values of Fluxus members who desired to generate a feeling of spontaneous community among its artists and viewers. Fluxus members believed that their community could be international and attempted to articulate it as such.

The international flavor of the group has been articulated in a variety of ways. Scholars and artists of Fluxus including Friedman, Dick Higgins, and his daughter, Hannah Higgins, have attempted to describe the connections that existed across nationalities between Fluxus participants and occasionally, to prescribe meaning. These scholars have applied the terms internationalism, globalism, global, and, more recently, transnationalism as labels to facilitate writing about the group's international

connections. The use of these labels is based on the involvement of artists in various countries including the United States, a number of European countries such as Germany, France, and Denmark, as well as Japan, and are also applied to the Korean born, but German and American educated, Nam June Paik. Dick Higgins' designation of "internationalism" as a key Fluxus marker stems specifically from both the varied national backgrounds of participants as well as the coordination of Fluxus events and distribution of Fluxus materials in different countries. Ken Friedman, also both a participant in and historian of Fluxus, chooses the term "globalism" to describe the international aspect of Fluxus. For Friedman the term "globalism" embraces the idea that "we live on a single world, a world in which the boundaries of political states are not identical with the boundaries of nature or culture." He states that "It's not simply that boundaries no longer count, but that in the most important issues, there are no boundaries" (244). Friedman writes that Fluxus encouraged a dialogue between minds when "social purposes [were] in tune."

Despite the ability to describe the transnationalism of Fluxus, how this transnationalism functioned in its own time has not been well explored. For example, Hannah Higgins has stated that Fluxus's transnationalism is an obvious critique of American values and their spread. Hannah Higgins loosely defines transnational as "doing its [the avant-garde's] best to transgress and ignore national boundaries, nationalist gestalts." She writes that due to its transnationalism, Fluxus can be "appropriately understood as an indictment of American hegemony in the postwar period" (265). Higgins' assertion is problematic in that she does not define

“American hegemony” nor does she state clearly why the transnational aspect of Fluxus works should be “appropriately understood” as a critique. The Cold War, which began in the mid-1940’s and lasted until the early 1990’s, happened in part because the United States was not the only super-power. Rather this was a period of fiercely competing ideologies and ferocious nationalism because the United States was not securely hegemonic, but intensely threatened by Communism. The United States during this period also did not have a global hegemony organized around the spread of American products and culture through the international free market as we have today.

Ono: Transnational Identity and Beginnings

Yoko Ono herself can be characterized as a culturally transnational person, a person whose identity and personal history make us aware of the distinctions constructed along the cultural borders of nations. Due to this, she had the ability to maintain more than one perspective on the dynamic mixing of Japanese and American culture. Born on 18 February 1933 into a wealthy and prestigious Japanese family, Ono had spent six years of her life in the United States before the age of twelve. Ono’s father was a high ranking employee of the Yokohama Specie Bank – Japan’s largest foreign exchange bank until the end of World War II. When the Ono’s lived in New York City in the early 1940’s, prior to the United States entry into World War II, she attended a public school on Long Island, near her home. Besides solidifying her understanding and use of English, this experience also gave

her a “certain brashness and cultural ambivalence” that would always distinguish her from her more conventional classmates once she returned to Japan (Kirk 20). Mrs. Ono returned to Japan with Yoko and Yoko’s new baby brother in the spring of 1941 less than a year before the United States government declared war on Japan. Initially Yoko was sent to an exclusive school geared towards children of the upper class and those who had studied abroad. As the bombing of Tokyo became more intense, Mrs. Ono took her two children to live in the countryside. Both her family’s wealth and time spent outside of Japan became grounds upon which other children ostracized Ono and her brother. Yoko recalled being called “butter tea” by other children, referring to her Americanization from the time abroad. Ono was often isolated by people’s projections onto her of a kind of “otherness;” thus she often felt like an outsider in both American and Japanese cultures. Though this outsider status may have strengthened Ono’s independent nature, “the abiding image of being incomplete and hidden, of loss and absence, and the aspiration toward unity and connectedness that marked her childhood would also become recurring themes in her work” (Yes Yoko, Munroe 14). When the war ended, the Onos moved back to Tokyo and Yoko was enrolled at the elite Peer’s School, where her classmates included the Emperor’s two sons. Ultimately, Ono grew up in a time of intense national fervor in Japan, fueled by war time dislocations and traumas, both personal and collective.

Yoko began her university life in Japan studying philosophy, but after only two semesters she moved with her family to Scarsdale, New York and enrolled at Sarah Lawrence college in Bronxville to study poetry and composition. Ono began to

feel trapped by her family legacy and resolved to break with it. Ono recalls that “The pressure of becoming a Yasuda/Ono was so tremendous – intellectual, social, academic, and bourgeois pressure. Unless I rebelled against it I wouldn’t survive” (qtd. in *Yes Yoko*, Munroe 16). In 1955, she dropped out of school and eloped with a young Julliard trained pianist and composer, Toshi Ichianagi, with whom she then moved to Manhattan. In a sense, Ono substituted one form of privilege for another, her family prestige for the exclusivity of the avant-garde art world. Yet this act poised her to use the transnational aspects of her life in ways that would have been unavailable to her if she had followed a more traditional path.

Ono’s ethnicity helped her gain work when she first arrived in Manhattan. She often took small jobs that played on her Japanese background. Both Ono and Ichianagi were employed by Beate Sirota Gordon of the Japan Society in New York City. Their job consisted of performing in cultural programs at universities, colleges, and other organizations as requested. These performances could include the recitation of traditional poems, calligraphy, music, the performance of the tea ceremony, and instruction in origami.

Ono quickly became active within the New York avant-garde art scene. After Ichianagi became friends with John Cage, he introduced Ono to the composer. After this, she and Ichianagi occasionally attended Cage’s class in experimental composition at the New School for Social Research in New York City. Ono also hosted and performed in the Chamber Street Series held in her loft in downtown Manhattan from December, 1960 to May, 1961. The series was originally organized

by composer and musician La Monte Young who had studied with John Cage in Darmstadt Germany and then moved to New York in 1960. The series was intended to be a forum for experimental forms of poetry, performance, events and music. Ono explains how the performances ended up in her loft at 112 Chamber Street:

A friend of mine told me that was this group of artists who were thinking of putting on their works and would I mind if they joined me and did things together. And I said no, I wouldn't mind, and perhaps they wouldn't mind painting my loft for free. (qtd. in Cott 118)

While initially intended by Young to show the works of 24 different artists, in the end, he arranged only seven presentations, the first of which (composer Terry Jennings) performed in December of 1960. Ono performed only occasionally, once in Ichihara's *IBM for Merce Cunningham* on January 7 and 8, 1961 (Yoshimoto 86); and another time she performed a combination of her *Kitchen Piece* and *Smoke Piece*. Former director of the Japan Society in New York City, Beate Sirota Gordon described this event:

Yoko ran to the refrigerator, took out some eggs and, running to a wall covered with a huge piece of white paper, hurled the eggs at it. She then ran back and fetched some jello, which she also threw at the wall. Using her hands as brushes, she splattered some black ink on the paper. As a final touch, she lit a match and set fire to the "painting," at which point, looking at

all the wood around us, I told myself, "... we're all going to die in a Soho loft." Luckily, Yoko had put some fire retardant on the paper, and we escaped a fiery death"(Sirota Gordon 155)

George Maciunas attended a number of these events where he first became acquainted with artists who would later participate in Fluxus, including Ono. While Maciunas had had a previous interest in art, what he saw and heard at the Chamber Street series redirected his interest towards new forms and inspired him to create something similar. He once remarked that "This whole series gave me an idea to imitate it and make an even more extensive series at our new gallery" (qtd. in Yoshimoto 85). Maciunas and Almus Salcius, a fellow Lithuanian, opened AG gallery at 925 Madison Avenue in New York City. Maciunas' mother recalls:

On the advice of a friend he rented a place on Madison Avenue and opened a gallery. He took ultra-modern avant-garde paintings. The paintings didn't sell well and the gallery wasn't very well attended. Yurgis [George Maciunas] worked as a draftsman and all his earnings went to this gallery, printing and dispersing of prospecti and letters. He also sketched himself, drops with India ink on a white background. We sold one such work, but cheaply, for fifty dollars. I had to sit in this gallery all day and clean up the huge hall. (qtd. in Smith 32)

While Maciunas and Ono held series more or less simultaneously, they were not in competition with each other. Maciunas explained that “They were slightly different but not much, like we both feature[d] Jackson Mac Low, we both featured Bob Morris and La Monte Young. But we wouldn’t show the same composition...” (qtd. in Smith 35). The Chamber Street series was not a publicly advertised event. In fact it was by invitation only, though the people attending were asked to give Young names of people who might be interested so that he could include them on the mailing list. The Chamber Street series was intended to be more of a forum for artists to try out new experimental works to a select audience that was already interested in and sympathetic towards these events. The events organized by Maciunas, on the other hand, were advertised and open to the public. Maciunas, who wanted these events to be accessible to a more general audience, was not opposed to providing an educational framework in the program. In his announcement for the “Bread & AG” evenings, a series of literary work performances that began on March 14, 1961, Maciunas included this background:

The intention of these programs is to present authors & their work directly to the audience. Mostly new writers, new spirits. The programs and many of the works are longer than are usually presented, usually 3, sometimes 2 hours long, respectively. For all this, a tempo of the casual & elongate, frantic & enduring, is intended ... New tone, new time. (qtd. in Smith 35)

Maciunas wanted to provide the audience with some knowledge to help them appreciate these experimental works.

Ono had her first show at George Maciunas' AG gallery. It consisted of both traditional *sumi-e* drawings and experimental works. She began composing event scores as early as 1958, and during her two year return to Japan, from 1962-1964, she exhibited them for the first time. The event scores were brief instructions for either mental or physical performance by the viewer. What was important in these works was acting out and exploring the concepts contained in each piece, the idea of the instruction, not the physical representation of the instruction. She explained:

To make the point that the instructions were not themselves graphic images, I wanted the instructions to be typed. But in those days, regular typewriters for the Japanese language were not available. Only professional printers and newspapers had typesetting machines. So I thought of the next best thing, which was to ask Toshi Ichiyanagi to print out the instructions by hand. He complied. My handwriting was too emotional, even when I tried to print – it looked like I was asking people to appreciate the visual aspect of the writing itself. Toshi was able to do a very neat job – close to typesetting, since, as a composer he had experience in copying his own scores for print. (Instruction Paintings 5-6)

These event scores were soon published as a bilingual collection titled *Grapefruit* (1964). Originally published in a limited edition of 500, the work was distributed

through Maciunas' Fluxus connections to the United States, Europe, and Japan.

Grapefruit was the manifestation of Ono's joining of her two distinct cultural influences, wedding the metaphysical bent of Zen Buddhism to the physical and mental enactment of her instruction pieces.

Chapter Summaries

In Chapter One, I argue that Ono's hybrid Japanese and American identity played into her acceptance in Fluxus and affected the reception of her work both by American and Japanese audiences. The 1950's and 1960's in the United States saw a renewed interest in Japanese culture. Maciunas was heavily interested in Japan and other artists associated with Fluxus were interested in Zen. Maciunas was inspired by Ono's Chamber Street Series to create his own series of avant-garde performances and to host experimental art exhibitions, including Ono's first gallery show. Ono's dual identity elicited a positive response in the United States where she was perceived as a cultural carrier of traditional Japanese values while the influence of her many years in the United States was ignored. In Japan, she was seen as neither Japanese nor American. Her time abroad had diluted the purity of her Japanese identity while her focus on the American development of her work within the New York City avant-garde art scene seemed to elicit disdain from her Japanese audience who saw her performances as merely imitative of the work of artist John Cage and lacking in originality.

Ono's hybrid identity came to play in her art as well. In Chapter Two, I explore the use of Zen Buddhist elements in Ono's works, especially her instruction pieces. As event scores, Ono's instruction pieces were inspired by John Cage's system of musical notation, though the event score is first explored by Ono, as well as artists La Monte Young and George Brecht. Ono believed that we were "trapped in a world of stickiness" and that one way to move beyond this was to embrace the enactment of the apparently illogical in order to create the possibility of changing our conscious perceptions of reality. Ono's limited knowledge of Zen was deepened through her friendship with Cage and exposure to philosopher T.D. Suzuki, both of which imbued the instruction pieces with a more philosophical stance. Ono's work reflected the five characteristics of Zen inspired art formulated by Helen Westgeest: emptiness, dynamism, indefinite and surrounding space, direct experience of the here and now, and nonduality. Ono was interested in creating art as a vehicle for changes of perception and thus invited the performance of her work by as many people as were willing. The significance of Ono's pieces did not lie in the object or instruction itself, but in the work done by the participants and the shifts in perception that this work might induce.

In Chapter Three, I show how some of Ono's pieces function as rituals with the intention of creating *communitas* among the participants and as part of the Fluxus tool kit to aid in solidifying the transnational and intensely human focus of the group. As mentioned earlier, Ono's Japanese background played into her acceptance within Fluxus. Fluxus functioned as a collective due both to shared ideas as well as

economic necessity, despite the difficulty for its members in articulating the group's borders. Some members recognized that Fluxus functioned as a "conceptual country" grounded in leftist ideologies in which various members understood the works, in part, to be tools in aid of subverting nationalist rhetoric. Ironically, the group was either unaware or unwilling to recognize that they were not, in fact, global, but transnational within the geopolitically bounded area of Westernized, democratized, industrialized Northern hemisphere countries, as unintentionally demonstrated by Mieko Shiomi's *Spatial Poem No. 1* (1965). Some artists dealt with specifically transnational themes, like the work "South" which plays with the sound of an English word spoken by a Korean artist, when the Korean Conflict was still close to recent memory. Ono's works bridged national disjunctures through the creation of *communitas* generated by creating a liminoid performance experience. In effect, Ono felt that new rituals were needed to deal with the Cold War world.

Theoretical Considerations

This thesis draws primarily on two areas of discourse: transnationalism as a defining concept in the discourse surrounding Fluxus and the performance theories of Victor Turner.

Fluxus's Cosmopolitan Transnationalism

Fluxus's transnationalism was an articulation of a privileged cosmopolitan outlook inherently tied to ideologies of democracy and universality. Scholar William

Barbieri writes that the dominant understanding of cosmopolitanism “militates against the intrinsically territorial idea of sovereignty Its individualistic logic leads ultimately to the reduction of national differences . . .” (105-9). Though such understanding of the cosmopolitan disavows the necessity of the state, the fact remains that cosmopolitanism is dependent on distinctions between nations. Caren Kaplan argues that between nations “cosmopolitanism demarcates [the] center from [the] periphery and erases possibilities of imagining distance in less binary and more complicated ways within transnational cultural production” (102). Not only is cosmopolitanism dependent on the existence of states, but as Bruce Robbins theorizes, the relationship between cosmopolitanism, nationalism, and nomadism is one that functions as an “*ideal* of detachment, [while] actually existing cosmopolitanism is a reality of (re)attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance.” Never completely detaching from a nation, the person is able to choose where and when they create an attachment to a specific geography. The nomadic power of the non-affiliated is based on economic privilege. Kaplan asserts that nomadism has been subsumed into European cosmopolitanism, allowing those who travel at will to represent themselves as “world citizens” who adopt as much of a “native” life as they wish in “foreign” lands” while retaining their European identity and its attendant power (126). That said, Fluxus’s transnationalism can be understood to have a cosmopolitan bent in which members see themselves as world citizens, detached from nations, yet only able to understand themselves this way due to the

economic privilege that comes from actually being a citizen of an industrialized, democratized country.

Despite working in three geographically distinct regions (United States, Japan, and Western Europe) Fluxus members maintained a cohesive set of ideas and practices within the group by having a “house” newspaper and making good use of the international mail system to correspond regularly with one another. When forming group identity, geographic proximity is less important than the ability to tap into a shared discursive network, to have “connectivity.” According to theorist Inderpal Grewal, a discourse of global or universal subjects has resulted from “connectivities” that emerged along with contemporary cosmopolitan subjects in relation to specific nationalisms. Fluxus developed within a cosmopolitanism bound by Cold War constraints. However, Grewal expands the definition of cosmopolitan such that the categorization is no longer dependent on the subject’s mobility, but refers to “participation within various discourses of the global, national, and international that moved across transnational connectivities and enabled subjects to cross boundaries or claim to transcend them” (Grewal 38). Cosmopolitanism is dependent on connectivities and the discourses that travel through them.

Fluxus members participated in a cosmopolitan network of knowledge production inherently tied to ideas of globalism and democracy. Ken Friedman wrote that Fluxus members welcomed dialogue with like minds regardless of nationality. Friedman continues that the Fluxus view of globalism is democratic and envisions a “world inhabited by individuals of equal worth and value suggest[ing] – or requir[ing]

– a method for each individual to fulfill his or her potential.” He notes that a number of Fluxus projects tied into the idea of democracy. These included Joseph Beuys’ projects for direct democracy, Nam June Paik’s television experiments, Robert Filliou’s programs, Dick Higgins’ Something Else Press, Milan Knizak’s Aktual projects, George Maciunas’ multiples, and Friedman’s own work in communication and research-based art forms (245). While the Western industrialized nations and some developing nations are essentially democratic, he states that humanity is far from a global democracy. He further writes that people’s potentials are best filled in “an open or entrepreneurial society in which the opportunity to advance is based on the ability to create value in the form of goods or services” (Friedman 245). Thus Friedman ties democracy back to capitalist-oriented development.

In concert with the cosmopolitan orientation of Fluxus’s transnationalism, there also existed a genuine desire to blur national borders or the distinctions sometimes made between people due to assumptions associated with borders. In both thought and praxis, some Fluxus members sought to delineate and articulate a kind of “conceptual country”. Estera Milman describes Fluxus as a “conceptual country that granted short-term citizenship to an international community of self proclaimed cosmopolites [and] provided them with a nationality” (n.p.). Some joked that Fluxus would one day take over existing institutions. In reality, the group set up their own production and distribution system for their art, while constantly negotiating amongst themselves how politically active the group would actually become.

Performance Filters

While transnationalism provides one filter through which to understand Fluxus, the performance theories of anthropologist and theorist Victor Turner provide another, especially his ideas of the liminal, the liminoid, and *communitas*. In some Fluxus works, including Ono's, a liminoid moment was a hoped for performance result. Turner used both the terms liminal and liminoid to express a certain ambiguous, open, and indeterminate state. This was a state of transition during which one's normal boundaries of thought, self-understanding, and behavior become less static and more permeable. Turner writes that,

The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the position assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention.... As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. (79)

The term liminoid was developed by Turner to explain the liminal state in a contemporary "technologically complex" societies. Unlike liminal rituals that effect a permanent change, liminoid practices effect only a temporary change in the participants. The liminoid is central to understanding the works of Yoko Ono. Ono

creates scenarios in which participants can have a direct experience with the world, to cut through the many layers of thought to which our experiences are often bound. Ono does not attempt to represent reality in her art. Rather she produces art that can be an integral part of living. Performance theorist Richard Schechner calls this type of work an “actual” by which he means the “special way of handling experience and jumping the gaps between past and present, individual and group, inner and outer” (40). The actual is about a true interdisciplinarity, blending art and life, not to mimic nature but to make an art that is whole like nature, “here and now, and efficacious” (49). Ono approached her event scores in the same spirit, though grounded in Zen Buddhist philosophy and aesthetics. Ono’s familiarity with Zen helped her to see the viability of imbuing the event score with the possibility of creating a shift in perception through a liminoid experience. Likewise, Fluxus’s members sought to transcend the limitations of nationalist discourse by creating works that would transgress the boundaries, not of metaphysical constructions, but of political ones.

Chapter One

Japanese in America, American in Japan

Yoko Ono was forced to deal with varying responses to her ethnicity and her work based on the perception of which culture she represented, Japanese or American. Ono came to the United States in the 1950's, at a time when there was great interest in the "Orient" including among avant-garde artists and composers. She became a member of the avant-garde art group Fluxus by way of George Maciunas, who exhibited an interest in Asia as well as a cosmopolitan tendency which led to the inclusion of Japanese members. Ono, however, recognized that her identity was a combination of both Japanese and American influences. Though the concept of cultural hybridity had not yet been articulated as such, Ono's situation can be understood as one of proto-hybridity. Her life and works bring together distinctions from the Japanese and American influences on her life. Moving from elite position to another, Ono straddles her dual upbringing and multivalent reception by framing her identity not as specifically Japanese or American, but as an artist. By defining herself as an artist, Ono creates a vehicle with which to escape being pigeon-holed into a more limited national identity.

Japanese Culture in post-war America

In the postwar years, Japan was the object of American military occupation. Within this context, the United States attempted to subsume Japan into its own identity, thus Japan became the “object of a widespread desire for possession” (Winther 57). This desire was focused towards those aspects of the culture that seemed distinct from American culture. Like other colonial and occupying powers, the United States had “a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world” (Said 12).

In the United States of the 1950’s and early 1960’s, Japan was conceived of as novel, different, and exotic, something that could be incorporated into American culture, a place that offered “lessons” and “alternatives” to Western thought. Interest during this time was so prevalent that the writer and painter Hasegawa Saburo remarked that: “In about a hundred days [in New York City] I was asked by about a hundred people about Zen and sometimes it was they who were telling me about Zen. . . . When I went out to eat in Greenwich Village, invariably somebody young or old, painter, musician, or poet would get a hold of me and start talking intently. How dearly they desire to learn from the Orient!” (qtd. in Winther 57).

According to David J. Clarke, “Oriental Thought” became a popular fad among American artists from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s (n.p.). Art historian Bert Winther elaborates, stating the “Oriental Thought generation...sought to pump meaning and profundity into abstract art by drawing

on ideas which they associated with East Asian culture such as detachment, passivity to nature, spontaneity, the void, transience, chance, and the rejection of rationalism” (Winther 57). However, the understanding of “the Orient” was rarely more than superficial. A limited number of works by both Asian and non-Asian authors informed the enthusiastic reception of Asian culture in the United States. These included the works of Ananda Coomaraswamy, Eugen Herrigel, Arthur Waley, Carl Jung, Alan Watts, and D.T. Suzuki. Artists Morris Graves, Stanton Macdonald-Wright, Isamu Noguchi, and Mark Tobey, who had been interested in “Oriental Thought” before World War II, picked up their interest again at the war’s end. In the late 1940s they were joined by artists like John Cage, Paul Jenkins, Franz Kline, Ibram Lassaw, Richard Lippold, and Charmion von Wiegand. In the 1950s, interest continued to grow as other artists such as Carl Andre, William Baziotes, Philip Guston, Seymour Lipton, Gordon Onslow-Ford, Jackson Pollock, Ad Reinhardt, and Theodor Stamos followed suit (Winther 57). The presumption that Americans understood Japanese culture was challenged by Japanese academics: “Westerners may flatter themselves, believing that they now qualify for . . . [advanced] dialogue. For example, they may think that their modern art has received immeasurable influence from Zen Buddhism and so on. From our point of view, what they are talking about is certainly, in most cases, a *soi-disant* Zen, little resembling the teachings of orthodox Zen Buddhism” (Yamada 269).

Nonetheless, new movements like Neo-Dada, Assemblage, Happenings, and Fluxus, informed by a convergence of East Asian aesthetics, poetry, and metaphysics and elements of Euro-American modernism, were challenging traditional art forms as some artists reacted against the ostentation of Abstract Expressionism and the market-orientation of high modernism. These new movements reflected artists' interests in Dada, Western phenomenology and existentialism, notions of minimalism, indeterminacy, and everyday realism extracted from Buddhist thought (Munroe 17).

Artists sought new sources to inform their work. Indeed, they looked to the "history and ... tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it [the 'Orient'] reality and presence in and for the West" (Said 5).¹ They rejected Western models to the extent that the 1963 *Fluxus manifesto* advocated a need to "Purge the World of 'Europanism'!" (Mac Low 49). This rejection however, was far from negative. Artists sought to explore and affirm everyday life and its relationship to art. Just as the artists of Dada had created works in response to the failure of Enlightenment oriented faith in moral and cultural progress that occurred during WWI, so the later post-war avant-garde responded to the horrors of WWII by focusing on the concrete material reality of everyday life. This time, however, the

¹ Edward Said writes that "We must take seriously Vico's great observation that men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to geography: as both geographical and cultural entities – to say nothing of historical entities – such locales, regions, geographical sectors as 'Orient' and 'Occident' are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West."(5)

idea of universal wisdom was structured in part around Asian philosophy and aesthetics (Munroe 16-17).

Oriental thought generation artists like Mark Tobey (1890 – 1976) explored characteristics associated with Japanese culture including emptiness, impermanence, and the benefits of the seemingly irrational. Despite his long interest and readings in Zen, his visits to Japan and China, and his 1934 month long study of Zen in a Japanese Buddhist monastery, Tobey claimed that his work was significantly different from its source and that in fact, “no one in Japan has done what I can and have done” (qtd. in Kelley 116). While claiming independence from his Japanese sources, Tobey also used these sources to differentiate his work from that of abstract expressionist painters. He distinguished his paintings from the abstract expressionists because he had incorporated Japanese calligraphic practices into his work. Tobey stated, “I know that Kline exists and Pollock, but I have another note” – by which he meant his earlier travels to Japan. (qtd. in Kelley 116).

Tobey’s attitude though was not always completely sympathetic to Asian cultures, and in fact has been construed by some art historians as having a xenophobic bent (Winther 61). Tobey asserted a particular American “right” to Japanese culture due to its geographic proximity and ties to parts of Asia and warned of the need to understand Asian culture lest the United States be overcome by it. In 1945, shortly after Japan’s surrender to the United States Tobey wrote that,

America more than any other country is placed geographically
to lead in this understanding, and if from past methods of

behaviour she has constantly looked toward Europe, today she must assume her position, Janus-faced, toward Asia, for in not too long a time the waves of the Orient shall wash heavily upon her shores. (qtd. in Miller 70)

While Tobey's views were not unique, art historian Bert Winther affirms that this was a "sentiment which weighs heavily in the configuration of Asian culture in his art" (61) and reflects an American desire to control the postwar political and cultural exchange between itself and Japan.

Unlike Tobey, Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988), an American designer and sculptor, who was the son of a Japanese poet and an American teacher, had access to more than one perspective through which to understand the interrelation of different forms of aesthetics. Noguchi was born in Los Angeles, spent his early childhood in Kamakura and Yokohama, and then returned to the United States where he was educated in Indiana and New York. Noguchi's first trip to Japan as an adult came in 1931 (a few years before Tobey's) and was "undertaken as a mission of self-discovery and confrontation with his estranged father" (Winther 61). Over the course of his long career, Noguchi went through periods of both intense "identification with the United States and separation from Japan (from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s) as well as intensive identification with Japan (most notably the early 1950s)" (Winther 61). Noguchi used his ethnic background according to context. Winther remarks that Noguchi intended to voice an "indigenous" American culture in his sculpture, *Monument to the Plough* (Fig. 1). Since a Japanese presence would

undermine this intention, he downplayed his Japanese heritage while bringing his American nationality to the foreground. On the other hand, the ability of an international audience to view him as a representative of Japanese culture was crucial for the success of works like *Jardin Japonais* (Fig. 2) at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris (Winther 61).

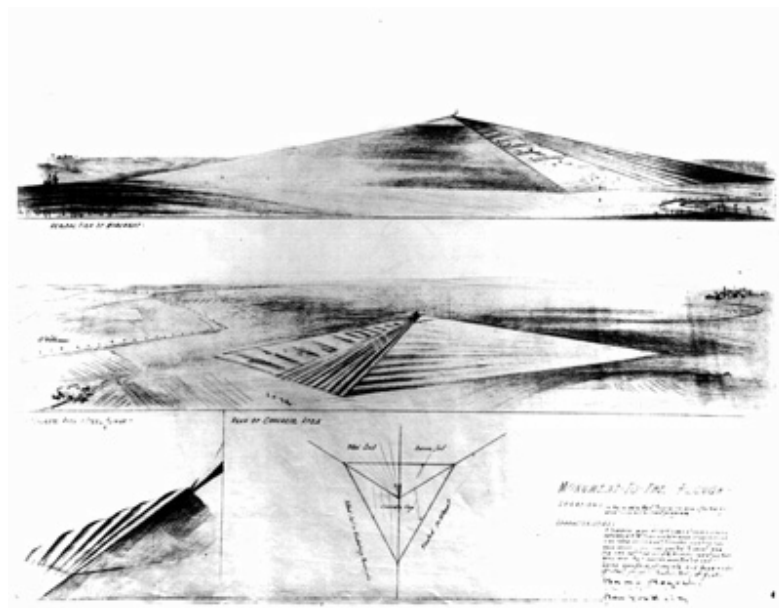


Fig. 1. *Monument to the Plough* (1933) unrealized: Triangular pyramid, one mile wide at each base. One side plowed, one planted, one left fallow.



Fig. 2. *Jardin Japonais* (1956-1958)

Fluxus, Maciunas, Ono: avant-garde meets cosmopolitanism, meets orientalism.

Fluxus artists were part of this general move among the avant-garde toward an interest in Asian culture. Within Fluxus, this took the form of a cosmopolitan transnationalism and included the incorporation of Zen-inspired tendencies due to the influence of John Cage. Fluxus members came to see themselves as “world citizens” or citizens of a transcendent “State of Flux,” ignoring the fact that their activities and membership were, in reality, geo-politically bound and their ability to move between countries, a mark of privilege.

From the beginning, Fluxus reflected a cosmopolitan outlook, comprised, as it was, of artists from the United States, Europe and Japan. Fluxus members embraced the idea that people live in a single world in which the boundaries of cultures are not necessarily identical to the boundaries of political states. Both the group's intentionally transnational membership and activities reflected this belief.

The utopian attitudes expressed by a number of Fluxus members also point to their cosmopolitanism. They believed that Fluxus, and Fluxus artists, could transcend national boundaries, and that, as Ken Friedman states, "It's not simply that boundaries no longer count, but that in the most important issues, there are no boundaries" (245). When scholar Estera Milman presented Fluxus artist Alison Knowles with the speculation that "Fluxus was a kind of conceptual country that granted short-term citizenship to an international community of self proclaimed cosmopolites [and] provided them with a nationality," the artist enthusiastically replied:

And do you know another idea that's linked to that? I love it. It's Bob Watt's idea that Fluxus could overtake existing institutions, the churches, the grocery store, and of course George [Maciunas]'s minesweeper; all of Fluxus gets on the minesweeper and goes around the world. Alison pulverizes the fish to make bread; someone else has the role of getting the flags up to guide the ship. In a funny way it was a world of people. ... That's absolutely right. The world of Fluxus did exist somewhere. (4)

Not only did the artists understand Fluxus as a conceptual country, but they worked to make it concrete, arguing over what should form its ideological basis and exploring alternative production and distribution systems.

Besides participating in a conceptual country, Fluxus members also participated in a cosmopolitan network of knowledge production, in part based on shared “connectivities.” Grewal Inderpal theorizes that a discourse of global or universal subjects resulting from “connectivities” emerged along with contemporary cosmopolitan subjects in relation to specific nationalisms. Grewal expands the definition of cosmopolitan such that the categorization no longer depends on the subject’s mobility, but refers to “participation within various discourses of the global, national, and international that moved across transnational connectivities and enabled subjects to cross boundaries or claim to transcend them” (38). While Grewal’s “connectivities” plays most directly into the space created by the internet, even within the mail system used by Fluxus, people could be quite strongly connected. Certainly, transnational connections were possible and could produce groups and identities (23). Grewal writes that “Connectivity [implies]...that new networks are created within which nodes of power come into existence through relationships created within networks. Thus ... ‘Networks may be more or less decentralized, but the general notion of connectivity in a net is that each element is interconnected with a multiplicity of other elements.... Furthermore, while some subjects may have been constituted by these connectivities, others participated in them intermittently or in unstable ways” (38). Consequently, the “cosmopolitan” in a subject’s identity and

behaviors need not be seen as either inherently stable or homogeneous, but can be understood as both uneven and unstable even as their ability to become connected to each other remains viable. Cosmopolitanism is thus dependent on connectivities and the discourses that travel through them.

It is this type of cosmopolitanism, which depends on connectivities and not necessarily geographic movement, which initially allowed Maciunas to bring Japanese artists into the Fluxus fold. The “binary of mobility and immobility” within subjects was just beginning to diminish in importance by the end of the 1950’s as the international mail system made communication consistent and efficient, thus one could have transnational participation in a discourse moving through this rudimentary net of communication. Indeed, it is via mail that members of Fluxus were able to communicate so easily and consistently from the various countries in which they were working. Maciunas especially spent an immense amount of time corresponding with artists through the mail, requesting and receiving Fluxus art works, and organizing performances.

Even before the first Fluxconcert, Maciunas’s preliminary plan for the *Fluxus* magazine listed a special Japanese edition which was to contain contributions from a variety of Japanese avant-garde calligraphers, composers, and critics. Most of the people included had little or no direct communication with Maciunas and their names were most likely provided by Toshi Ichiyanagi, Yoko Ono, and Nam June Paik. Some of these artists began to correspond with Maciunas and eventually came to New York (including Ay-O and Mieko Shiomi). The Japanese Fluxbox had been

scheduled to be published by August 1962. What is interesting about this is that American tourist visas for the Japanese only began to be issued again in 1964. While it was possible to come to the United States prior to this as a student or to emigrate, the ability to move freely between the two countries as a tourist was restricted. Friedman's earlier statement that the state is not important is slightly idealistic considering that the group's Japanese members were severely limited in their ability to move across some national boundaries until 1964. These Japanese members were integrated into Fluxus's cosmopolitan network of "knowledge" production through the ability to make transnational connections via the postal system, despite not necessarily being able to travel.

Bringing Ono into the Fold

Maciunas, the self-designated impresario of Fluxus, also had a strong personal interest in Japan and in making certain that Fluxus was a transnational operation. At the same time, he idealized Japan, seeing it as essentially different from Western Europe or the United States. Edward Said's statement that "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident...'" illuminates Maciunas' perceptions of Japan (2). A friend of Maciunas, Ann Noel, recorded in her diary in the spring of 1977:

Ay-o and I were having a conversation about the similarities between his country and mine, Japan and England; that they

are both islands, maintain royal families, have lots of rain, cars drive on the left-hand side of the road and so on and so forth. George went off immediately to find an atlas to compare annual rainfall and population graphs and to prove that our countries have, in fact, very little in common. (qtd. in Williams and Noel 135)

Maciunas had an extensive knowledge of Japanese history, owned at least one Japanese sword, and had even suited his loft with tatami mats. He also seemed to view Japan as a comforting and carefree haven. When he became fed up with his interactions with other Fluxus artists, he wrote Emmet Williams that he had been “disappointed with Fluxus people and am contemplating phasing out by this summer & maybe going to Japan” (qtd. in Williams and Noel 133). He also wrote to Bob Watts of his plans to establish a commune there:

I will move in 1964 to Japan & establish there a permanent collective farm. I am asking several people & you to join me there in 1964....I would initially invest in a farm & we would subsist by growing our own food & doing little things like composing, performing, Fluxing around, publishing all kinds of things, swindling idiots & robbing the fat capitalists.... (qtd. in Williams and Noel 128)

Maciunas was invested in the construction of Japan as idealized other and a place for him to seek refuge. However, he never made it to Japan. Instead, he brought Japan to himself by the active introduction of Japanese members into the New York Fluxus group.

Maciunas' orientalist perspective and interest in Japan helped shape the membership of Fluxus. He wished to have a Japanese presence within the group but his choices seem to have confounded some of the people with whom he associated. Jill Johnston, a friend of Emmet Williams, wrote to Williams in a letter from the spring of 1963:

Eric tells me that GM really liked Japanese women, that they didn't threaten him, he being or being at that time a virgin and all...? That women like Carolee terrified him, etc. etc. ... What was Yoko to Fluxus, in the early days? My impression was, not much. Did she get into it through Ichiyanagi? How did Shigeko get involved? I think I have it straight about Saito, that George just brought her to the U.S. because something she sent him impressed him - ? As for Shiomi, I get the idea she followed Ay-O here - ? Alison the token Western woman, four Japanese women – I can't make too much sociology out of it – Help! (qtd. in Williams and Noel 125)

Without making too much sociology out of it, it is enough to say that though other Western women were associated with Fluxus, there were not many.

And the inclusion of a number of Japanese women artists was difficult for some of Maciunas' friends to understand.

Yoko Ono became acquainted with Maciunas after she moved to New York City in 1956 with her husband at the time, Ichiyanagi Toshi. Ono hosted and performed in the Chamber Street Series held in her loft in downtown Manhattan from December 1960 to May 1961. It is here that she and Maciunas first met. Maciunas was impressed with both the performance series and with Ono. As a result, he offered to give her a show at his new gallery. Ono's first exhibition, *Paintings and Drawings by Yoko Ono*, opened at Maciunas' AG gallery in July of 1961. The exhibit consisted of two distinct sets of works. In the front of the gallery, Ono's instruction pieces were presented (Fig. 3). In the back of the gallery were *sumi* ink paintings (Fig. 4). Maciunas encouraged Ono to make the *sumi* ink paintings in order to exploit American associations of the exotic to her Japanese ethnicity. He believed that Ono's "authentic" Japanese works could be marketed more easily than her experimental ones. In fact, he was correct; two of the paintings were sold. Her use of calligraphy and *sumi* ink (which was featured on the exhibition poster as well as in the gallery) reinforced the supposedly natural association of Ono with Japan and with Zen Buddhism (Altshuler 67).

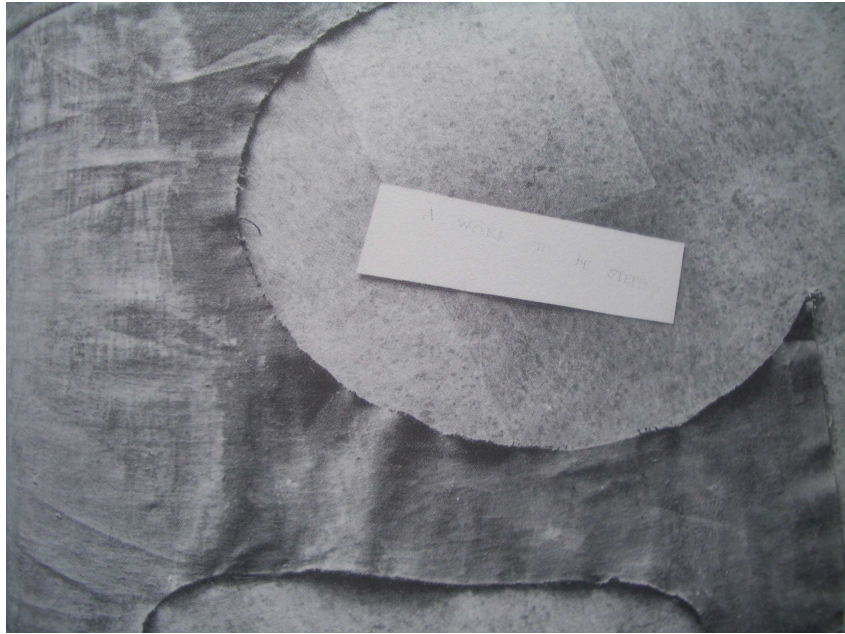


Fig. 3. *Painting to be Stepped On* (1961), AG Gallery show



Fig. 4. Ono with *sumi* ink drawing (1961), AG Gallery show

Playing on Difference

Ono's presence worked as a sign of authenticity for both Fluxus members interested in Zen and for Fluxus's transnationalism. Ironically though, Ono herself was continually conscious of the two identities placed on her: Japanese in the United States, American in Japan. Ono alternated between associating herself with American culture and Japanese culture when she performed or showed her work. On April 3, 1961, Ono performed in *An Evening of Contemporary Japanese Music and Poetry*, at the Village Gate in New York City. This was a three person concert presented by David Johnson. The program included music by Mayazumi Toshiro and Ichiyanagi, and poetry by Ono. In this performance, Ono staged and narrated *Of a Grapefruit in the World of Park*, and was accompanied by David Tutor, Mayuzumi, and Ichiyanagi (piano); La Mar Alsop and Kobayashi Kenji (violin); Jacob Glick (viola); and David Soyer (cello) (Tomii and Concannon 308). The performance consisted of a taped background of mumbled words and wild laughter, musicians playing atonally, and a performer reading the accompanying text with an unemotional voice. Ono's premier of *Grapefruit* occurred after she had been living in the United States for about five years. There was nothing in the performance that marked it as "Japanese" and the performers were a mix of Japanese and non-Japanese artists. Thus, the labeling of the event as "Japanese" appears not to be descriptive, but appears rather to be a strategy to increase the audience's interest by eliciting associations with the exotic in their imagination.



Fig. 5. *Cut Piece* (1964)

Three years later, on July 20, 1964, Ono took part in a performance billed as *Contemporary American Avant-Garde Music Concert: Insound and Instructure* which took place at the Yamaichi Hall in Kyoto. It included solo events by Anthony Cox and Al Wonderlick. It also marked the beginning of a three day program in Kyoto during which Ono's *Cut Piece* (Fig. 5) and *Bag Piece* were premiered. Again, the performers were a mix of Japanese and American. Ono's *Cut Piece* and *Bag Piece* are not marked in any specific way as "American" or "Japanese" and were in fact performed in both countries. Again the overarching label, this time "American" in a Japanese context, appears to be strategic rather than descriptive.

Once in the U.S. again, Ono played again on her Japanese identity. On January 1, 1966, Ono took part in a radio program aired over WBAI Radio, New

York titled *Japanese Transitions* in which she sang unaccompanied traditional, folk, and contemporary popular songs of Japan in their proper styles, commenting on the material she performed. Later in the month, on January 13th, she performed a solo show titled *Avant Garde in Japan* at the Davidson Art Center Gallery, Wesleyan University, in Middletown, Connecticut. At the event she performed *Wind Piece* and *Breathe Piece*, as well as discussed her work. She hadn't lived in Japan since the fall of 1964.

Ono was not unique in recognizing the benefit of playing to American perceptions of the Japanese (as constructed by American discourse). When Kenzo Okada came to the United States in the 1950s, a friend advised him “that if he was going to champion a Japanese form of oil painting, it would be a good idea to emphasize the typically Japanese aesthetic of *yugen*” (Winther 56). *Yugen* is a classical Japanese aesthetic term characterized according to Munroe by such qualities as “crepuscularity, serenity, depth, and mystery” (126). On this advice, Okada developed an abstract style of oil painting that played on these qualities. His compositions were delicate and comprised of muted colors and ungrounded forms. He also played with motifs associated with Japan, like the cherry blossoms found in his 1954 oil painting, *Hana* or “Flower” (Winther 57).

Ono's reception in Japan during her two year stay from 1962-1964 was influenced by her experience overseas, yet the result was often quite negative. Far from being immediately understood as a transmitter of authentic American culture, she was accused of being a mere impersonator of American artists like John Cage.

Though it is Ono who traveled with Cage when he came to Japan on a month long tour, the connection did not seem to lend credibility to her originality so much as overshadow it. The ambiguous nature of Ono's identity served her in positive ways in the United States, yet the Japanese did not welcome her Americanization as enthusiastically as Americans had embraced her Japanese ethnicity.

The Japanese critiqued Ono's work as unoriginal and called it a rip-off of John Cage's avant-garde experiments.ⁱ This led Ono to believe that it would be difficult for her to continue working in Japan. She thought that

Japanese critics were, in those days, so influenced by Western Europe and the United States that their main work was to introduce artists who were featured in American art magazines. They were just picking and writing on Japanese artists whose works were in a similar style to American trends, such as Neo-Dada and Pop. It was natural then that they maintained a brother-in-law-like attitude to me, being very indifferent to everything I did. (qtd. in Yoshimoto 102)

Japanese art critics had borrowed the art-historical discourse of the West and could thus write only about Japanese artists whose works fit Western criteria. Ono believed that most "Japanese critics at that time merely followed the trends in Western art without exploring critical contexts of their own" (Yoshimoto 102). Yoshimoto continues with the explanation that many critics and journalists ridiculed or ignored Ono's work, in part because there was no vocabulary with which to understand it (102). Some press reviews framed Ono's work as eccentric, though a few others did

credit her with introducing the newest American art form, Happenings. Western art critics in Japan were not necessarily receptive either; critic Donald Ritchie wrote a scathing review of one of Ono's concerts in which he accused her of stealing ideas from John Cage (Yoshimoto 94-5).

The "American in Japan" phenomenon also happened to Mieko Shiomi, also a member of Fluxus in Japan. The Japanese viewed her as a link to the United States and the American avant-garde. However, unlike Ono, who sometimes performed under the label "American" when in Japan, Shiomi wanted to maintain the coherency of her Japanese identity and align herself with her Japanese colleagues and audience. Shiomi, among several Japanese artists, returned to Japan in the mid-1960s, at a time when Tokyo Fluxus was at its most active. With Tokyo Fluxus thriving, Shiomi was able to prominently situate herself within the Japanese avant-garde. She was not regarded as just a member of the group, but respected as one of the few independent artists who had actually experienced the New York art scene.

Unlike Ono, Shiomi had spent only a couple of years in the United States, thus her identity as Japanese had not been undermined in the eyes of her Japanese audience. Ono's Japanese identity was precarious to many Japanese due to her foreign education and the significant amount of time she had lived in the United States. However, in looking Japanese, Ono was also not suitably American enough to be a believable representative of American culture in the eyes of many Japanese.

During the first week of September, 1965, an exhibition and a series of events, *Flux Week*, was presented at Gallery Crystal, a new gallery in Tokyo's Ginza District.

The exhibition featured Fluxus publications and objects, accompanied by concerts and events in the evening. While the other participants' names were listed in Japanese, Shiomi's name was printed in English. Yoshimoto suggests that this may have been done to emphasize Shiomi's New York experience, Shiomi herself was not pleased at the attention (159). She relays that "Shiomi hated this special treatment of her name because it seemed to advertise her as a Westernized person who valued her experience living abroad to the point of forgetting her Japanese roots" (230). While Shiomi seems to have resented being singled out for her experiences abroad, the reception to her work was overwhelmingly positive.

While Ono sometimes positioned herself, or found herself positioned, as an "other" against the cultural background in which she was performing, it became part of a strategy from which she desired first and foremost to be recognized as an authentic, individual artist. Though brought into Fluxus by Maciunas, Ono was never entirely comfortable with the idea of being in a group and wanted to loosen the affiliation. When asked about her return to Japan from 1962 – 1964, Ono explained that she felt the scene in New York City was becoming stagnant and she did not want to be one of the great dames of the avant-garde who just went on repeating herself. Once in Japan, Ono, unlike Shiomi, did not affiliate herself with Tokyo Fluxus. Ono's hybrid identity may have caused some problems in how she was received by her audiences, yet this hybridity was also a source of creative inspiration. It contributed to her ability to maintain an independent artistic sensibility as she began to

intentionally mix the Zen philosophy of her background with the Euro-American avant-garde forms in her work.

Chapter 2

Pay Attention, Play, & Dismantle

Beyond her role in bringing the first Happenings to Japan, Japanese critics did not often recognize Ono as a transmitter of American culture. Her American peers, on the other hand, embraced her as a sign of authentic Japanese aesthetics as typified by her Zen-based sensibility. Her transnational background came to the fore as she incorporated Zen-oriented elements into her works of the 1960s, especially her event scores. Other artists who came to be associated with Fluxus began producing event scores at around the same time as Ono, including La Monte Young and George Brecht, but Ono's works showed the influence of her transnational background, as she molded the Western form towards a more Zen based orientation, many examples of which are contained in the compilation *Grapefruit*.

These works found favorable reception in the United States. Though “America” as nationalist discourse contained imperialist elements, it also produced many kinds of agency and diverse subjects (Grewal 2) including a space for Japanese artists interested in the artistic freedoms and possibilities available in the United States. In the 1960s restrictions eased for Japanese wishing to come to the United States. The Asian Cultural Council, founded in 1963, offered scholarships for Asian students to study in the United States, attracting hundreds of Japanese artists,

musicians, and dancers. In 1964, Japanese tourist visas to the United States became available, allowing artists to visit New York. Japanese contemporary art was actively introduced to the American public through exhibitions like the Museum of Modern Art's 1966 show, *The New Japanese Painting and Sculpture* (Yoshimoto 36-8). Additionally, New York Fluxus had a significant Japanese membership which included critic Kuniharu Akiyama, avant-garde composer Toshi Ichiyanagi, and artists Yoko Ono, Mieko Shiomi, Ay-O, Takako Saito, Shigeko Kubota, and Yayoi Kusama.

Like Ono, Kusama's work was often explained in relation to her Japanese background. Bert Winther calls this tendency "artistic nationalism," defined as an ideology that determines the "aesthetic significance of the work of art (in its creation or reception) according to beliefs about national identity" and adds that this can be driven by "partisan interests typical of nationalist rhetoric" (2). An example of this in Kusama's work is related to the critical reception of her series of oversized white "net paintings" she created in New York. These paintings aroused interest in critics who saw a meditative quality in them, which they believed came from Eastern philosophy. For instance, critic Sidney Tilliman wrote in *Arts Magazine*, "What results is a profound symbol of detachment. Conditioned by a tradition of not only black and white but of self-effacement, perhaps only a Japanese artist could create an art of withdrawal without the polemical emotions of Western Abstract Expressionism" (56). Tilliman's analysis of this piece is grounded in the idea that Kusama's paintings necessarily express a distinct aspect of Japanese culture. Kusama was unbothered by

these interpretations, believing that “cultural difference could contribute to an image of originality” (Yoshimoto 39). It is unclear to what degree originality was of primary importance to Kusama in a Japanese context, yet she recognized the utility of being described as unique in an American context since this characteristic was highly valued. While Kusama’s and Ono’s works did, at times, incorporate Japanese cultural influences, American critics often approached their works with the assumption that the pieces would *necessarily* reflect the national background of the artist.

Ono incorporated Japanese elements as “cultural difference” in her works, especially exploring the ability of the event score to take on and put into practice Zen philosophy. Her interest in this was in part based on her understanding of the world as “sticky.” Ono believed that we are “trapped in a world of stickiness.” Our constructed perceptions of the world keep us from seeing it clearly. In fact, Ono believed that “contemporary men ... are soaked to the bones with a fabricator called consciousness” (“Imagine Yoko” 117). With our consciousness, we have constructed a fictional order to human life, such that it is falsely perceived as rational and controlled. Ono’s work attacks the belief that logic and reason lead to a clearer understanding of being human. Logic expresses only one dimension of the human condition. Yet, according to D.T. Suzuki, who was instrumental in spreading Zen Buddhist ideas to the West in the 1950s, “logic has so pervasively entered into life as to make most of us conclude that logic is life and without it life has no significance” (61).

Ono's works suggest that "paying attention" may be a way out of this stickiness. By "paying attention" I mean disassociating one's self from discursive language and shifting one's focus to sensation. Ono's instruction pieces often provide direction as to how one might better pay attention, whether to the physical world or to our mental construction of ourselves in relation to the world. In this way Ono's work provides a means to change how we understand reality in its metaphysical sense. "All my things have to do with the inner life, inner communication and transformation," Ono stresses (Hickcock 11).

Performing Transnational Identity, or Connecting Through Zen

As discussed earlier, Ono realized early on that many of her American friends were interested in Zen philosophy. However, it was John Cage whom she credits with validating the transnational character of her identity. He opened up artistic possibilities "in emphasizing that it was all right to be unique," or culturally different, thereby acknowledging the significance of Ono's Japanese heritage and encouraging her to explore the possibilities that came from it (Enright 35). Ono's incorporation of Zen elements in her work emphasized this transnational identity. Cage encouraged her to embrace her national heritage, and she did just that by taking the avant-garde form of event score concurrently being developed by artists like La Monte Young and George Brecht and applying to it a more Buddhist sensibility.

The event score structurally resembles Zen koans. Neither a riddle nor witty comment, the koan's purpose is to arouse doubt and frustration beyond a tolerable

limit. The koan works to shut out all possibility of rationalization, to create such a sense of agitation in the person that in desperation and without thought, they move beyond the “relatively constructed consciousness” and transcend the intellectual “limits of logical dualism” (Suzuki 108). Like the koan, the event score could be written in a spare manner and ask the performer to consider even the seemingly illogical.

Unlike a Happening which Ono viewed as an assimilation of art forms, an “event” was “an extrication from the various sensory perceptions.” The event was more the enactment of a “wish” or “hope” by and for the participants (“Imagine Yoko” 103). Ono saw events and happenings as fundamentally related but different in their intention. Allan Kaprow produced one of the first Happenings *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts* in 1959 at the Reuben Gallery in New York City.

Happenings were essentially unconventional, open-ended theatre pieces that had no plot and were usually only performed once. The performers and audience were not separated in the performance space; indeed, the audience often became a participant in the happening. Chance was deliberately employed in the enactment of the happening which was “generated in action by a handful of ideas or a flimsily jotted down score of root directions” (Kaprow 19). The happening was impermanent and not reproducible; with a premium placed on chance, even another performance generated by the same ideas would inevitably be different. In a 1966 essay in *Something Else Press*, Kaprow defined Happenings as,

an assemblage of events performed or perceived in more than one

time and place. Its material environments may be constructed, taken over directly from what is available, or altered slightly; just as its activities may be invented or commonplace. A Happening, unlike a stage play, may occur at a supermarket, driving along a highway, under a pile of rags, and in a friend's kitchen, either at once or sequentially. If sequentially, time may extend to more than a year. The Happening is performed according to plan but without rehearsal, audience, or repetition. It is art but seems closer to life (5).

Similarly, Ono wanted to create events that would allow other people to be creative as well. This desire came from the idea of giving that she remembered from stories of the Buddha that she had heard as a child. Ono relayed one in which the Buddha one day leaves his wealthy family to wander. Each time he is asked to give something, he gives what is asked of him. Finally, a tiger asks him for his body and when he gives his body he is transformed into spirit. Ono saw this as the embodiment of total giving. Ono believed her struggle to be one of discovering how to give completely: "The struggle with art, for me, became about the concept of whether you were stating your ego through your work or creating an environment where other people can be creative as well" (qtd. in Huberty 42). In this sense, Ono was concerned with creating works not for her own gratification but for the gratification of others.

Barbara Haskell has suggested that Ono's work *Cut Piece* was inspired by the same concept of total giving (Haskell & Hanhardt 91). Ono examined *Cut Piece* in a

1974 article published in a Japanese magazine. She discusses her first performance of *Cut Piece* after her return to New York in 1964:

Soon after I returned, I did the event, *Cut Piece (Cutting Event)* at Carnegie Recital Hall as a comeback work. For this event, I sat dressed on the stage, and the audience cut my clothes with scissors however they wanted. In the past, artists produced their own work and then they showed it to the audience. When I want to give a present to someone, I give them something I really want to [give them]. And traditionally, the artist's ego is in the artist's work. In other words, the artist must give the artist's ego to the audience. I had always wanted to produce work without ego in it. I was thinking of this motif more and more, and the result of this was *Cut Piece (Cutting Event)*.

Instead of giving the audience what the artist chooses to give, the artist gives what the audience chooses to take. That is to say, you cut and take whatever part you want; that was my feeling about its purpose. I went onto the stage wearing the best suit I had. To think that it would be OK to use the cheapest clothes because it was going to be cut anyway would be wrong; it's against my intentions.

I was poor at the time, and it was hard. This event I repeated in several different places, and my wardrobe got smaller and smaller. However, when I sat on stage in front of the audience, I felt that this was my genuine contribution. This is how I really felt.

The audience was quiet and still and I felt that everyone was holding their breath. While I was doing it, I was staring into space. I felt kind of like I was praying. I also felt that I was willingly sacrificing myself (qtd. in Concannon 30).²

Despite Ono's intentions, the sentiment of giving was not generally comprehended by the audience. Instead, the performance was often received as a kind of striptease. At the 1964 Tokyo performance, the combination of Ono's nudity and confusion over titles (*Strip Tease for Three*, which involved three *chairs* on stage, but no people, was also performed that night) created misunderstanding and the piece was reported as an avant-garde striptease. An unidentified Japanese reviewer described it as having the "theme of a striptease," and in a 1971 review seven years later the *International Times* joked that "Tits are good marketing PR. Draws them in like flies." Even Ono's friend, filmmaker Takahiko Iimura, when discussing the 1966 DIAS performances in London described it as a striptease: "At the Africa Centre, she performed *Bag Piece* and *Cut Piece*. *Cut Piece* is a performance in which Yoko sits on the stage and, one person at a time, the audience cuts her clothing with scissors. It is almost like Yoko's striptease by the audience...." (Concannon 29). Tony Cox's

² The first performance of *Cut Piece* took place on July 20th, 1964 at Yamaichi Hall in Kyoto as part of *Contemporary American Avant-Garde Music Concert: Insound and Instructure/Yoko Ono, Tony Cox, Al Wonderlick*. The second performance of *Cut Piece* was part of the her 1964 farewell concert *Yoko Ono Farewell Concert: Strip-Tease Show/sprout motional whisper/ Yoko Ono, Tony Cox, Jeff Perkins* which took place at Sogetsu Kaikan Hall in Tokyo, August 11. The third performance took place on March 21st, 1965 at Carnegie Recital Hall in New York City as part of *Norman J. Seaman presents Yoko Ono*. The fourth and fifth verifiable performance of *Cut Piece* by Yoko Ono herself occurred at the *Destruction in Art Symposium* that presented *Two Evenings with Yoko Ono* at the Africa Centre in London on the 28th and 29th of September, 1966.

discussion of the 1965 Carnegie Hall performance mentions only the shift in the audience's attention during Ono's piece: "In contrast to the rest of the concert, which is usually filled with restlessness in the audience, this piece always takes place in complete silence, with periods of several minutes elapsing before the next performer (member of the audience) gets enough courage to come up on the stage. Usually, only one third of the audience performs while the rest apparently consider the prospect."

(18). The audience seems caught up in the illicitness of slowly cutting away Ono's clothing, but there is no indication that her performance is recognized as a gift.

Alaster Niven, administrator of the Africa Centre where the fourth and fifth performances were held, further indicates that the audience responded to the slowly unveiled nudity of Ono, cheering when Ono's last piece of clothing, a "G" string, was cut off her. He stated that "The reaction of the public to the press reports was overwhelming. The telephone rang ceaselessly with inquiries about another performance including a call from a titled lady, who shall be nameless, asking to book two seats in the front row" (Diss., Stiles 610).

It was not the only work of Ono's to be misunderstood by her audience. At times Ono expected the audience to understand a work in a particular way because of the sensibility she presumed they would have, but sometimes the audience behaved differently. Yoshimoto reports that in Japan "Ono's events were received as eccentric.... With dim lighting, and subtle sounds and movements, she intended to intrigue the audience and have them use their own senses to interact with her performances. She expected the Japanese audience to share an acute sensibility to

catch hidden messages in her pieces. Ono wished that even in the darkness, the audience would grope for the invisible *kehai*, or vibrations” (94). A disappointed Ono found that the Japanese audience did not share this sensibility. In fact, the domestic source of Ono’s inspiration, Zen, was completely overlooked by Japanese critics who were much more interested in new Western trends (Yoshimoto 94).

Buddhism, Stickiness & Ono’s Instructions

However, Ono’s use of Zen elements functioned around her desire to inspire a jolt of insight through art. The enactment of her instruction pieces is intended to “cause an inner, contemplative reaction” in the spectator (Hickcock 7-8). Ono wanted to do this by creating and following fictional rules. While artists like John Cage attempted to heighten man’s consciousness by employing a method that mimicked the “chance operational characteristics” of nature, Ono believed this was arrogant. She saw men attempting to raise themselves to the level of nature by simulating its operations (“Imagine Yoko” 113). In her essay “The Word of the Fabricator,” Ono wrote that it was not by imitating nature, out of which we come, that would help people to transcend the limits of their constructed consciousness, but by attempting to follow “the most fictional rules” (“Imagine Yoko” 117). These rules were often created from the actions of daily life, though altered in some way. Ono used fictional rules in order to provide a possible avenue out of the stickiness of the world, that is, our logic based understanding of reality. Ono wanted,

not to be confused with the high-minded types who feel they have achieved Satori by becoming plantlike. I am still groping in the world of stickiness....I cannot stand the fact that everything is the accumulation of “distortion” owing to one’s slanted view. I want someone or something to let me feel it. I can neither trust the plantlikeness of my body or the manipulation of my consciousness. I know no other way but to present the structure of a drama which assumes fiction as fiction, that is, as fabricated truth (“Imagine Yoko” 119).

Ono’s idea of “stickiness” is similar to *doxa*, or common sense. Common sense, while often as culturally constructed as any other fiction, is understood as obviously true. However, common sense is “true” because it does not contradict popularly held ideas of the surrounding culture. The self referential definition of reality and truth creates “stickiness,” or difficulty in recognizing the constructed nature of culture.

Ono uses language cues to provide an avenue for moving beyond popularly asserted cultural meaning. Just as Roland Barthes theorizes a loss of self, a state of bliss, through immersion in the text, Ono invites others to lose or expand their sense of self not so much by engaging with the text of her instructions, but by taking each text as the suggestion of a possible action to explore the boundaries of meaning. In fact, she points to the limitations of language as a means for exploring or communicating beyond the rational. Her work mirrors the Zen attitude that we are “slaves to words and logic” (Suzuki 61). We become slaves to words and logic when

we believe that logic can be used to understand all of reality and the words can be used to completely describe it. Logic can actually be used to maintain “stickiness,” concealing ideology by claiming to be free from ideology.

Ono’s *Question Piece* (1962) explores this fallacy. First performed in Tokyo at the Sogetsu Art Center in 1962, two people on stage asked questions of each other in French yet never answered except with another question. The piece could be performed in any language or combination of languages, as a monologue or dialogue (Grapefruit n.p.). *Question Piece* was also performed in 1964 in English on the Voice of America Radio Program, Tokyo, and in Japanese on NTV (Japanese Television) by six children from the audience (Grapefruit n.p.). Ono’s *Question Piece* operated as a virtual Tower of Babel; not only were questions answered with questions, but it is unlikely, in the original performance, that many in the Japanese audience would have been able to understand the questions asked in French. Both the audience and the piece’s performers would have left with no clearer sense of reality or their place in it, much like the result of the many failed communications that occur in everyday life.

Ono’s instruction pieces, like *Question Piece*, are partially based within the Zen Buddhist framework she learned as a child. As a youth Ono was the beneficiary of private tutors, one of whom familiarized her with Buddhism. Ono remembers that “There were several maids and private tutors beside me. I had one private tutor who read me the Bible and another foreign tutor who gave me piano lessons, and my attendant who taught me Buddhism” (qtd. in Kirk 22). Given the best Japanese education available, Ono was familiar with the I Ching, Noh, and Zen (Yoshimoto

39). After moving to the United States as an adult, she expanded her knowledge of Zen through her friendship with John Cage and exposure to T.D. Suzuki.

Zen provided a useful paradigm for Fluxus artists, including Ono, who were interested in disrupting the relationship of the individual to the world, in understanding the self “as one *provisional* center in perpetual interaction with the infinite multiplicity of centers that constitute the world” (Doris 127). Along with the notion of chance and the merging of art and life, Zen aesthetics offered infinite paths of exploration for artists looking for alternatives to Euro-American modernism (Yoshimoto 38). While certainly exposed to Zen ideas through books and travel, Ono’s most concrete conduit was John Cage. According to Fluxus artist Emmet Williams,

The argument goes like this: John Cage was a student of Daisetsu T. Suzuki, the Japanese religious philosopher who helped to make the Western world aware of the nature and importance of Zen. In turn, many of the activists on the American Fluxus scene studied with Cage, who opened a few of the Doors of Perception for some of them. Ergo: Fluxus has a direct connection with Zen. It would be more accurate to say: Ergo: Fluxus has a direct connection with John Cage (163).

Cage’s historic 4’33” marked the beginnings of a radical shift in performance. The piece consisted of three movements, each a silence framed by pianist David Tudor opening and closing the piano lid. No keys were struck. Cage worried that a musical composition of silence would be dismissed as a joke; by his own recollection, a

number of people in the audience were irritated that no music was actually played (Baas 171). For Cage sounds made by the perplexed audience created music. Cage's piece was inspired by the Buddhist idea that "Life is Activity ... The marvelous thing about it is when activity comes to a stop, what is immediately seen is that the world has not stopped. There is no place without activity" (qtd. in Kostelanetz 70-1). Cage intended to provide a frame around the silence so that the audience could listen to unmediated reality.

Cage's use of Zen principles resonates with the five characteristics that Helen Westgeest has proposed as identifiers of Zen inspired art: 1) emptiness, 2) dynamism, 3) indefinite and surrounding space, 4) a direct experience of the here and now, and 5) nonduality. The term *Mu* is used to mean emptiness and nothingness as "pure experience, the very foundation of our being and thought (19). As the foundation of being is emptiness, so the means of expressing it is unimportant. What is important is that Zen is a state of dynamism in which there is no stasis but only constant action. Suzuki once stated that "Life itself must be grasped in the midst of its flow; to stop it for examination and analysis is to kill it, leaving its cold corpse to be embraced" (Westgeest 20). Emptiness is not a void but a space that contains the ambience of activity. Ono had similar thoughts about the utility of questioning, stating that "Life does not have any questions, one lives life, one does not question life. You're only true to life when you're living, not when you are questioning" (Ono, qtd. in Dannatt 117). As her piece *Question* demonstrated, one could carry on a conversation in an

attempt to answer questions, but questions often lead to more questions, not to clarity. Language does not necessarily bring one closer to a clear grasp of life.

Ma, space and time, is also conceived in a specific way. Kitaro Nishida, a prominent Japanese philosopher, described the traditional Japanese way of suggesting space, as follows: "...the space in art from the Far East is not the space facing the self, but the space in which the self is situated" (qtd. in Westgeest 20). In Western art, the perspective is such that there is the object and its viewer, the viewer remaining outside the picture frame. Nishida suggests that in Eastern art the viewer is situated within the picture space so that there is less of a dichotomous relationship between what is in the frame of the picture and what is outside the frame. In the case of Ono's works, the viewer is often changed into a participant so that under the best of cases, the audience ceases to exist as they are taken in completely by the "frame" of the piece. This is what is required of the audience in order to complete Ono's *Painting to be Stepped On* (1960) (see chp. 1, Fig. 4). The audience must choose to become, if only briefly, an agent of completion. They step onto the canvas laid on the floor and thus completely into the "frame" of the picture.

Ono's work explores the construction of time as well. Like Cage, Ono saw that staying with an action longer than one normally does could change how you perceive its effects on your psyche and body. Cage once commented that "In Zen they say, if something is boring after 2 minutes try it for 4. If still boring try it for 8, 16, 32, and so on. Eventually one discovers that it's not boring at all but very interesting" (qtd. in Westgeest 80). This statement emphasizes the idea of remaining

engaged with an action long enough to actually appreciate it. By playing with concepts of time, altering how long something takes to happen, you are able to give yourself a frame within which to be more conscious of what is happening in any specific moment. By continuing an activity, or trying to continue an activity, beyond its normally socially sanctioned length, you are able to experience a new range of physical and mental awareness. Ono's *Cough Piece* (1961) in which she instructs you to "Keep coughing a year" (Grapefruit n.p.) does just this. Without a doubt, one cannot cough for a year. Yet, attempting to cough continuously for even an hour creates an entirely new awareness of sensations in your body.

Zen also encourages the direct experience of the here and now. Since all goals are located in the future, when one focuses on the here and now, a state of "purposelessness" is produced. In Zen literature, there is a well-known story told about three men who climb to the top of a mountain only to find upon reaching the top that a man is already there. When asked why he is standing on top of the mountain, the man replies: "I am just standing here." In an American pragmatist example akin to Zen, John Dewey in his *Art as Experience* also underscores an understanding of life as direct experience. He characterizes this experience by a felt immediacy, both basic to it and irreducible, in which "action, enjoyment, and what he called 'undergoing' were integrated and equally fundamental" (45-46).

This emphasis on appreciating the here and now stands in contrast to the constantly seeking state of capitalism. Historian Harry Harootunian believed that capitalism has no really normal state but one of constant

expansion; and expansion requires the permanent production of excess, surplus, in order for it to survive. Part of the price paid for continual expansion is the production of permanent unevenness, permanent imbalance between various sectors of the social formations...(xv).

This state of constant expansion manifests itself in the social psyche as dissatisfaction and a sense of being “stuck.” This stickiness is at its essence, an ideology. Roland Barthes calls “stickiness” the *doxa* of capitalism, which unlike other languages of power, is not “paranoid, systematic, argumentative, articulated” but rather has been naturalized, is unconscious...and is constructed inescapably in language as a “ruthless topic” that comes from a “warrior *topo*” (28-29). Perhaps part of what Barthes was getting at when he described capitalism as a sticky ideology is that in the spirit of capitalism, there is an endless cycle of dissatisfaction. In a capitalist oriented society one generally does not have time to appreciate the here and now. But Ono wanted the participants in her work to be in the moment, to “hear the kind of sounds that you hear in silence...to feel the environment and tension in people’s vibrations...the sound of fear and darkness . . .[and] of togetherness based on alienation” (qtd. in Hopkins 29).

This *doxa* can obscure the artist’s intention. Ono intended *Cut Piece* to be the complete giving of herself to the audience. Ono came to the performance in a spirit of trust, wearing her best clothes, so that those who participated would leave with the best she had to offer. Instead of being open to this possibility, the audience was

already programmed to interpret Ono's nudity within a specifically capitalist ideology. Due to expectations already shaped by a *doxa* in which the naked body is equated with an object of desire for consumption, Ono's slowly emerging body was framed as an unveiling of a new product for the audience's consumption. The *doxa*, the common sense notion, that the body is an object of desire for consumption restricted the audience's ability to understand any other intention in the work or to appreciate the more intangible gift of self that Ono offered in the moment.

Unlike the idea of duality that threads through Western philosophical paradigms from Plato's forms to Cartesian duality, Zen philosophy advises "a unification of antitheses" by means of nondualistic thought (Westgeest 23). Zen suggests a unification of the Cartesian distinction between subject and object, between matter and spirit. Instead of defining an "I...that is entirely distinct from the body," Zen views the removal of the "I" from material existence as a cognitively constructed and false separation. Ono's *Painting to Shake Hands (painting for cowards)* (1961), and *Mask Piece I* (1961) underscore and explicitly point to the constructed duality of self in a social environment. Ono subtitles *Painting to Shake Hands*, "painting for cowards" explicitly drawing attention to the fact that the person who performs this painting is hiding. She instructs you to "Drill a hole in a canvas and put your hand out from behind. Receive your guests in that position. Shake hands and converse with hands" (Grapefruit n.p.). To perform this, you must remain hidden behind the canvas. The piece suggests that you are playing the role of a host, and in this socially prescribed role must behave in a particular manner. In shaking the hands

you have formally greeted another person, but in conversing with the hands, she suggests that the social formalities are never dropped for more informal, and perhaps more revealing, behaviors. Even more direct is *Mask Piece I*:

Make a mask larger than your face.
Polish the mask every day.
In the morning, wash the mask instead
Of your face.
When somebody wants to kiss you,
Let the person kiss the mask instead.

1961 winter (Grapefruit n.p.)

In this piece the performer constructs a mask that then takes the place of the real person. In *Mask Piece I*, this mask or social image is important enough that it must be polished and taken care of every day. By washing the mask, instead of your face, Ono suggests that we sometimes expend more energy creating and maintaining this specifically social manifestation of ourselves, than we do nurturing and maintaining the more private self. Additionally, the mask acts as a barrier between the wearer and the person with whom they are engaging, keeping them separate from each other.

Ono's works suggest that "paying attention" may be a way out of the dualism implied in stickiness. As in Zen, Ono's instructions encourage your focus on the here and now, both by paying attention to the mind and drawing attention to the body and its relationship to the physical world. During a stay in a soundproof cabin, Cage noticed that a person always hears some sound from his own body (Westgeest 74). He experiences himself in relation to the cabin. Similarly, Ono first created "Lighting Piece", 1955 [Fig 1], in which she instructs you to "Light a match and watch till it

goes out,” out of a personal calming ritual in which she experienced a change in her mood after following the above instructions. Prone to anxiety as a young person, Ono found that lighting a match and watching it burn until it went out allowed her to connect through the action to a more calm state in herself (Yoshimoto 83).



Fig. 1: *Lighting Piece* (1955). Sogetsu Art Center Tokyo, 1962.

Ono encourages viewer participation and the enactment of as many of her pieces as people see fit to perform. Emphasis on the authenticity and uniqueness of art, what Walter Benjamin called the “aura,” is subverted by the various enactments of Ono’s instruction pieces. Instead, she sees her instructions as a genre similar to a music score, such that the performance of the ideas, not the score itself, is most important. Ono has stated,

The concept is my work. You can say that it’s the score: in music there is a score, and, let’s say Mozart wrote it and maybe played it once and made a notation or two. And now it’s played by a group of people centuries later and nobody says anything about that because it’s just viewed as a musical score that [anyone can play]. But that’s not done very much in the art world because most people just do the artwork and do not allow other people to participate in it. But, in my case, it’s instruction – the instruction is like a score. So, it’s all right that it’s repeated and repeated and repeated by other people.... (qtd. in Hubberty 44).

Ono dismantles the idea of the original even further, with her set of event scores that have no written original and were intended to be passed on by word of mouth. In the introduction to the 1964 edition of *Grapefruit*, Ono wrote to Maciunas,

Most of my pieces are meant to be spread by word of mouth, therefore do not have scores. This means is very important since the gradual change occurs [sic] in the piece by word spreading is also part of the

piece. [Nam June] Paik suggested that I send you a piece he likes which is one of the word spreading pieces. I have thought over quite a bit about it, since he was right to suggest the piece because it is also one of the very few pieces that is easy to perform. But I think I will not change my mind about maintaining the piece as a word-spread piece.... (n.p.)

Descriptions of the enactment of some of these word-spread pieces, like *Hide Piece*, are included in the 1971 edition of *Grapefruit*. Ono's *Hide Piece*, comprised of the one word instruction "Hide," was performed on at least four different occasions, each time with different performers hiding in a different manner. The first time it was staged in Carnegie Hall in New York City in 1961, all the lights in the concert hall including the stage were turned off and a girl hid behind a large canvas sheet while two men made soft vocal noises. In Tokyo 1962 the piece was performed again in total darkness. Performers hid behind objects on the stage while a man attempted to free himself from the bag he had been put in. A 1965 performance in New York City made use of the Canal Street subway station. Both performers and audience hid from each other however they chose. Finally in the Jeanette Cochrane Theater, in London, 1966, Yoko Ono hid for half an hour behind a three foot pole that she had brought out with her to the center of the stage (Grapefruit n.p.). *Hide Piece* was used as a score, open to multiple interpretations by different performers in accordance with Ono's belief that the "viewer" is a responsible party in the manifestation of the piece.

Her works also emphasize the manipulation of ideas and perception in order to play with our understanding of reality as logical. In the recognition of the constructedness of logic and the attempt to transcend it, one finds a way to rethink the self. Purely logical and dualistic thought restricts freedom and recognition of unity by focusing one's thoughts on limitations, exclusions, and differences (Suzuki 66-7). Many of Ono's event scores require the performer to create the event in his or her mind since they are not performable in the material world. The execution of the piece requires the performer to recognize and enact a mutability of perception. The score is not the point of Ono's work, but rather a catalyst to generate activity in the mind. Ono provides an example:

[A] tiny sphere that's like a baseball, well that alone is something that you can see anywhere. But when I say that this sphere becomes a very fine point by the time that it gets to the end of the room, then it becomes this special mental exercise. So, in a sense the conceptual significance of the work is the work, not the object itself.... (qtd. in Hubberty 41).

The significance lies in what happens in the "work" or exercising of the mind. The score is a catalyst; what is genuinely interesting is the performer's mental shift as they experience the exercise.

Ono's works simultaneously offered participants a catalyst for a shift in perception and Ono a chance to bring together the Western form of event scores with a Zen sensibility. Ono's works were part of the general cultural diffusion of Zen

Buddhism from East Asia to the United States after World War II. Within this transnational framework she provided a means for participants to move away from the alienation that sometimes accompanies modern living. Many of the works that asked the participant to pay attention simultaneously involved other people. In some cases this could engender a sense of *communitas*, or feeling of group solidarity. As discussed in chapter 3, Ono's works contributed to the Fluxus performance repertoire, but many of the pieces also created a space for everyday observer-performers of her work to connect with one another and create this sense of spontaneous community.

Chapter 3

Communitas in Transnationalism

Within Fluxus, *communitas* was geared toward overcoming national boundaries and its attendant nationalism. *Communitas* is a feeling of group solidarity, usually short-lived, generated during ritual. According to anthropologist and performance theorist Victor Turner, *communitas* comes in several varieties. Normative *communitas* is the sometimes dry and unfeeling display of group solidarity. Spontaneous *communitas* is a sincere out flowing of warmth for others in the group (Schechner 62). Ono's works contributed to the Fluxus group's repertoire, for example, with the event score and performance of *Sky Piece for Jesus Christ* (1965), but other works also created a space for participants in her work to connect with one another, creating the possibility for a sense of *communitas*.

The spirit of *communitas* can be characterized by a "spontaneous, collective effervescence, a feeling of endless power, mutual understanding, and illumination on the part of the gathered community" (Elam 468). *Communitas* is generated by shared attitudes, ideas, or experiences (Schechner 62). Turner argued that *communitas* required the community collectively to share ideological concepts and values. Such techniques allow for the possibility of experiencing a liminal state, free from the demands of daily life. Turner described the liminal state as "a fructile chaos, a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities, not by any means a random assemblage but

a striving after new forms and structure, a gestation process...[in] anticipation of postliminal existence” (Universals, 12).

While *communitas* was originally understood to be generated through the creation of a liminal space during ritual practices, Turner eventually turned to the possibility of *communitas* in industrialized societies though they are not oriented toward a ritual-based worldview. Turner created the term “liminoid” to indicate symbolic actions or recreational activities, including the arts and theatre, in contemporary societies that serve a similar function to the rituals of pre-modern and traditional societies. Thus, even in non-ritual based cultures, it is possible to create a liminoid state and generate *communitas* which ultimately, and most simply, is a “matter of giving recognition to an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be no society” (Schechner 81). Turner recognized theater as the inheritor of ritual since it had the possibility to create the structure of ritual in which a liminoid experience might occur (Middleton 49).

Just as Turner recognized that theater could offer the liminality of rituals, Ono felt that new rituals were needed to deal with the contemporary world. Though it would be hard to characterize Ono’s works as rituals per se, she recognized that people’s perceptions could shift due to participating in or viewing a performance. She kept this in mind when creating event scores, for like other Fluxus members she hoped to effect a change in the people who came to view or participate in her work. These pieces created a platform from which to overcome the alienation inherent in modern life and that is made explicit in nationalist discourse.

Cold War Fluxus

Fluxus sought to combat the perniciousness of nationalism by developing strategies within the frame of their “conceptual country.” The members of Fluxus worked as an international collective that sought through simultaneous practices to subvert national borders. One important way that Fluxus sought to do this was by creating their own distribution system, thereby working around both the gallery and museum system and the propagandizing of American values in which institutions like the Museum of Modern Art took part in during the Cold War of the 1950s.

The members of Fluxus operated as a collective both out of necessity and conviction. In the 1950s and 1960s there were few venues in which these artists could show. As Fluxus artist Dick Higgins noted “[T]here were few ways open to us to present our work” (qtd. in Smith 34). Many of the artists who became affiliated with Fluxus had leftist sympathies that may have exacerbated any difficulties they were having getting shows; artists who were suspected of Communist sympathies faced the very real prospect of censorship, especially if the work was in any way funded by the federal government. One egregious example of government censorship occurred in June of 1956 when the United States Information Agency (USIA) cancelled “100 American Artists,” which was anticipated to be one of the most important exhibitions of American painting to ever travel internationally. The organizers of the show, the American Federation of Arts, a New York based non-profit organization, refused to exclude the ten artists the USIA found unacceptable for political reasons (Cockcroft

152). Despite the United States government's refusal to fund the show, the MoMA officially launched the show six months later.

Because Fluxus artists were dissatisfied with the available mechanisms for distributing their work, Maciunas established the various Fluxshops and Flux Mail-Order Warehouses. In a 1978 statement, Nam June Paik explained the significance of the Fluxus distribution system that Maciunas had devised:

Marx gave much thought about the dialectics of the production and the production medium. He had thought rather simply that if workers (producers) OWNED the production's medium, everything would be fine. He did not give creative room to the DISTRIBUTION system. The problem of the art world in the '60's ... is that although the artist owns the production's medium, such as paint or brush, even sometimes a printing press, they are excluded from the highly centralized DISTRIBUTION system of the art world. George Maciunas' Genius is the early detection of this post-Marxist situation and he tried to seize *not only* the production's medium *but also* the DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM of the art world. (48)

Moreover, Maciunas believed that collective functioning was crucial to successfully promoting the different artists' works:

Fluxus is not an individual impresario & if each does not help another collectively by promoting each other, the collective would lose its

identity as a collective and become individuals again, each needing to be promoted individually. (Qtd in Spirit, Smith 34)

Maciunas' collective orientation reflected his support of communism; indeed, he had hoped to model Fluxus on the post-Russian revolution LEF (Left Front of the Arts) group in the Soviet Union (Huysen 143). Maciunas believed that an artist's activities were only significant when tied to the "socio-political struggle going-on now," and that Fluxus participants needed to coordinate their activities to this struggle or else become "another 'new wave' another dada club, coming & going" (qtd. in Attitude, Smith 133). In 1963, Maciunas organized a Fluxus festival in New York City. In his April 1963 newsletter to the group, he also proposed a series of propaganda events to be carried out from May to November in New York City as pre-festival activities. These included picketing, demonstrations, performance of works on streets and in public places, sabotage and disruption of transportation and communication systems, museums, galleries, and theaters, as well as the sale of Fluxus publications. Specifically he suggested:

Prearranged 'break-downs' of a fleet of Fluxus autos & trucks bearing posters, exhibits, etc. in the middle of busiest traffic intersections...Clogging-up subway cars during rush hours with cumbersome objects (such as large musical instruments ...long poles, large signs bearing Fluxus announcements..) Disrupting concerts at "sensitive" moments with "smell bombs", "sneeze bombs". And ordering by phone in the name

of the museum, theater or gallery a delivery at the exact [opening time] or just prior to the opening, various cumbersome objects: rented chairs, tables, palm trees, caskets, lumber, large sheets of plywood, bricks.... (qtd. in Attitude, Smith 112)

Maciunas' suggestions fit into the overall political direction he hoped to take Fluxus. Furthermore, he intended for these simultaneous practices to disrupt major cultural institutions, many of which, whether directly or indirectly, supported American Cold War nationalist rhetoric. *Communitas* was possible in acting in solidarity to disrupt nationalist ideology.

While not all of the European Fluxus artists shared Maciunas' convictions, most of them were comfortable with his anti-establishment position. American Fluxus artists were far less comfortable politicizing the group. The reaction from American Fluxus members against Maciunas' proposal was swift and strong and not what Maciunas had expected. American Jackson Mac Low wrote to Maciunas that, even though he was against certain aspects of "serious culture," specifically the commercialization of it, in general he was "ALL FOR IT [serious culture] & HOPE & CONSIDER THAT MY OWN WORK IS A GENUINE CONTRIBUTION TO IT" (Attitude, Smith 114). He specifically attacked Maciunas' plans for propaganda actions:

I am ... against all sabotage & needless disruption. I consider them unprincipled, unethical, and immoral in the basic sense of

being antisocial and hurtful to the very people whom my cultural activities are meant to help. It seems all silly sadism and as such it smacks more of fascism than any kind of socialism worthy of that name...I would not, except in certain exceptional circumstances, bother to attack and defile wrong types of cultural activity...Thus I favor all proposals for public and private exhibits, concerts, etc., which have a benevolent and helpful aura about them...the other stuff is old time middle-class (to shock the middle-class is a favorite middle-class activity) sadisticdada and sadly out of place in our present world....I hope you will come up with a whole different modern non-dada approach to “Fluxus propaganda” and other Fluxus activities... (qtd. in Attitude, Smith 114)

Another American artist, George Brecht, dismissed Maciunas’ proposal, saying that he saw anti-art as an aspect of art and that he was indifferent to them both. Furthermore, he stated “I can’t see myself taking part in the tunnel tie-ups. I am interested in neutral actions....” Brecht and Mac Low were not alone. While the outburst of negative reactions forced Maciunas to rethink his plans, he privately wrote to artist Emmett Williams that such reactions indicated to him that the artists in the United States were either “a-political, or naïve anarchists, or becoming sort of indistinct psuedosocialists”(qtd. in Attitude, Smith 115).

Despite, the lack of consensus among Fluxus artists as to its explicit political sensibility, Fluxus nonetheless “operated collectively, as a ‘community,’ with all participants helping to form its sensibilities and direct its development” (Spirit, Smith 34). Fluxus artists were divided in the degree of their political radicalism, yet there was an overwhelming feeling among members that the art world had been corrupted by capitalism and had become overly restrictive and too dependent on a social elite, that works of art had become commodities, and making art had become a profession (Spirit, Smith 34). Art historian Owen Smith writes that “even Jackson Mac Low, whose works were not overtly political, admitted in a letter to Dick Higgins that ‘serious culture’ had become problematic”:

I’m disgusted by its corruption and commercialization, & I agree that certain kinds of art, music & literature have acquired completely wrong kinds of prestige, & that far too many people have been bullied & bulldozed into trying to “succeed in the arts.” (qtd. in Spirit, 34)

Thus, despite varying degrees of political sentiments, Fluxus members tended to be critical of the mainstream art establishments and wanted their art to be available to a wider audience and to perhaps even have some effect on those who engaged with it.

For many of the artists, Fluxus embodied an “egalitarian alternative” to the then-current art scene. This alternative would be less ego-driven and more geared towards producing the kinds of works and events that could act as “nonprogrammatic means of education” (Spirit, Smith 34). As Maciunas put it, in order to “establish [an artist’s] nonprofessional, nonparasitic, nonelite status in society, he must demonstrate

[his] own dispensability, he must demonstrate self-sufficiency of the audience, he must demonstrate that anything can substitute [for] art and anyone can do it.” (Maciunas 8). Part of the shared ideology of the “conceptual country” of Fluxus was the idea that art could affect, at least on a small scale, cultural and political change and that performance could educate its audience.

Like Maciunas and Ono, Paik was involved in performances that could transcend nationalistic ideologies. In 1965, Japanese Fluxus artist Takehisha Kosugi wrote *South No. 2 (to Naim June Paik)*. The text reads,

Pronounce “SOUTH” during a duration of more than 15 minutes.

Pause for breath is permitted but transition from pronunciation of one letter to another should be smooth and slow. (Friedman 36)

Performed only twelve years after the end of the Korean Conflict (fought between 1950-1953), the word “South” (as in South Korea vs. North Korea) must have struck a chord with the audience. The Korean Conflict was the first armed confrontation of the Cold War and set the standard for future armed conflicts between the two Super Powers. The physical fighting was done in a third country where the people of that nation then suffered the majority of deaths and destruction as they were used for the purposes of the two larger and more powerful nations. Following the Korean Conflict, South Korea’s economy stagnated while North Korea’s economy quickly recovered, remaining ahead of South Korea until 1975. Thus, “South” could be associated with the questionable results of a war that ended not in clear victory but through a cease-fire, as well as the damaged economy of South Korea. The piece also

pokes gentle fun at Paik's strong Korean accent and "simultaneously invites the audience to study the translingual sound (of an English word spoken by an émigré Korean) for an almost unendurable duration" (H. Higgins 278). This Fluxus performance gave people a different way to think about Korea in light of the recent end to the Korean War.

Another piece influenced by the Cold War environment was Nam June Paik's *Suite for Transistor Radio (1961)* which included the following:

in Amsterdam channel, or in middle small river,
burn violin, and throw it to the river.
connect a thread at a transistor radio singing.
put it into the water very slowly.
lay a transistor radio in a plastic basin,
let it float in the middle of the channel
for many days and nights. (In Spirit, Kahn 111)

Transistor radios, first unveiled in 1953, became popular in the late 1960's. Even before transistor radios became widely available, the United States Congress was funding Radio Free Europe. Founded in June of 1949, Radio Free Europe's goals were to both inform listeners in Communist satellite countries (including Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Poland, and Bulgaria) and to bring about peaceful revolutions through political, instead of military, means. *Suite for Transistor Radio* reflected Paik's faith in technology to reach and unite people beyond national borders. Participants burn and throwaway the violin, a limited instrument of

communication associated with high culture, and instead use the radio, a medium designed to reach a mass audience. This new technology could drown out messages (“connect a thread at a transistor radio singing put it into the water very slowly”) yet also spread them, indeed, could “sing” them. And in a Cold War Europe, the United States and the Soviet Union were definitely in a competition to see whose message would be heard most clearly.

Some Fluxus pieces were collective transnational endeavors – for example, Japanese artist Mieko Shiomi’s text-object-action *Spatial Poem No. 1*, 1965-6 (Fig. 1). Like other Fluxus members, Mieko Shiomi felt a desire to embrace a connection with the entire world. She conceived the poem to be a word event as a way to “make collages on the earth or to write poems on the earth with people all over the world” (Yoshimoto 156). In order to create this piece she mailed her instructions to over one hundred people, about eighty of whom responded with documentation of their enactments of her word event. The request she had sent out was titled *A Series of Spatial Poems, No 1* and requested of people that they “Write a word (or words) on the enclosed card and place it somewhere. Let me know your word and place so that I can make a distribution chart of them on a world map, which will be sent to every participant” (qtd. in Yoshimoto 156).

Spatial Poem No. 1 provides a concrete demonstration of the international distribution of Fluxus members. The art object shows a loose cluster of flags centered over Western Europe and a more dense cluster around the West Coast of the United States, with a few flags in the southwest of the country. In the middle section

of the map are four flags, one seemingly in northern India, another in southern Japan, one flag out in the Pacific Ocean, perhaps marking Fiji, and the fourth staked through Hawaii. The distribution is primarily contained within westernized, democratized countries with capitalist based economies. Geographer Irit Rogoff writes that “cartography is a signifying practice of both location and identity... the unmapping, re-mapping, and counter-cartographies to be found within contemporary art practices revolve around the structure and signifying systems by which knowledge is organized and conveyed”(3). The masses of land on Shiomi’s map are delineated from the water by uniform black lines excluding any internal markers of either geography or state. The masses of land flow unimpeded into one another, memories of national borders only as accurate as the viewer’s mental maps allow. The lack of divisions seems to indicate that borders are unimportant, that as people who have “admiration for the earth,” Fluxus members could move across them freely. Further, per her desire to “write poems of the earth with people all over the world” (Yoshimoto 156), the enactment of *Spatial Poem No. 1* points to the connectedness of people, the ability to transcend borders through the collective fulfillment of her word event. Shiomi desired to record the distribution of a global art, and indeed the map enables viewers to “grasp the geographical spread of events at a glance” (Yoshimoto 156).



Fig. 1: Mieko Shiomi, *Spatial Poem No. 1*, 1966.

The enactments of the Shiomi's word event were varied and reflected the creativity of the participants. On one, Takako Saito wrote the word "melt" on a card, which was "supposed to be lying down under snow in woods at Ridgewood in New Jersey," but he added that the card was reported as "missing." Maciunas's event was to put a card into a bottle and throw it into the Hudson River "to reach somewhere in [the] Atlantic Ocean." "Robert Watt's card, which said 'Hungarian Mystery Princess,' was 'traveling from New Jersey to London to Nukualofa, Tonga.' (Yoshimoto 157).

A later poem in the series, *Spatial Poem No. 3*, "Falling Event" gave equally whimsical results. One participant, a Lithuanian musicologist, responded to *Spatial Poem No. 3* by reporting,

Falling Event. Various things were let fall: Vytautas Landsbergis caught a pike at the lake of Aisetas, cleaned its entrails and threw them into a pit towards the center of the earth. Then he cut the pike into pieces and let them fall onto a frying pan. July 31, 1966. (Giants, Paik 1991)

Shiomi commented that “The reports returned by various people are very diverse and full of individuality – some poetic, some realistic or cynical, some artificial, some spontaneous, etc. When they are all collected together, they present a fantastic panorama of human attitudes. I would like to think the collective anonymous poem can be preserved as a monument for the people of the 30th century – if we survive that long” (qtd. in Yoshimoto 157). Despite the lack of direct relation to people’s everyday lives, the results reflected the “essences of lives experienced at geographically diverse locations” that created a “sort of historic monument or poem written on the earth” (Yoshimoto 157). Shiomi’s comment also expresses the fear that humanity would not survive to appreciate a “poem written on the earth.” In light of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II and the threat of nuclear destruction during the Cold War, Shiomi’s fears are not unfounded. *Map Piece* is her attempt to show viewers that national borders lack solidity and that people across the globe are engaged in diverse performances of everyday life.

At the same time, *Map Piece* is transnational in its cosmopolitan attempts to make people conscious of national borders and in its attempt to transcend them. Shiomi sought to present viewers with a new way of looking at these national

boundaries. Undoubtedly national borders create national identities. Yet these national identities can sometimes alienate the citizens of a country when they do not agree with their government's policies. During the Cold War, to question American foreign policy or show support for anything that could be connected to Communism (including peace) was considered un-American. Yet Shiomi's *Map Piece* removes the constructed borders between nations, showing how arbitrary such lines are. The geography of the map lies intact while national borders are retrieved from memory haphazardly.

Inadvertently, Shiomi showed her viewers the limitations of Fluxus's practice, for geographically they reached only as far as the leaders of the "free world" allowed their citizens to go. The origins of the responses reveal that Fluxus's community was based on a notion of life in the industrialized world during the Cold War. Just as the United States government sought to keep Communism out of countries, so Fluxus's community and practice was "contained" within the sanctioned regions. Their community did not include artists from Africa, South America, or most of Asia, the very continents that had been the active focus of the United States containment policies of the 1950s and 1960s. Ironically, as the United States government fought to contain the spread of communism, it simultaneously contained its own citizens. Thus, Fluxus's activities were limited by Cold War tensions and the artists' geographic dispersal went only as far as the leaders of the "free world" had sanctioned.

Ono, Playing in a Conceptual Country



Fig. 2: *Sky Piece for Jesus Christ* (1965)

Whatever political messages may have been in Shiomis's *Map Piece*, the participants would have experienced it as a type of play. Fluxus events often centered around play. Dutch play theorist Johan Huizinga wrote that play is

a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious," but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own

proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupingsThe function of play [...] can largely be derived from two basic aspects under which we meet it: as a contest *for* something or a representation *of* something (13).

Those who participated in *Map Piece* can also be said to have played at *Map Piece*. The activity was outside ordinary life, though responses represented both ordinary lives as well as imagined ones. Shiomis instructions became the “rules” and her production of the physical map represented an artistically and ideologically bonded, though culturally heterogeneous, group of people. Many Fluxus works were, in some way, based on the idea of play as play was a useful tool within the conceptual country of Fluxus for creating *communitas* since play was a way to bridge ritual to get to the liminoid.

One example of this is Ono’s *Sky Piece for Jesus Christ* (Fig. 2). This work was performed as part of a Fluxus concert in Carnegie Recital Hall, New York in September, 1965. In this piece, a chamber orchestra was slowly wrapped in gauze bandages as they played classical music. Though they were being wrapped in the gauze, the musicians continued with their attempts to play music, the sound eventually becoming more and more contorted and fragmented. Ono herself admitted,

Sky Piece for Jesus Christ is not respectful. When you see them [the

musicians] come off the stage, you either have to laugh or feel terrible;
and you don't want to laugh. (qtd. in Stiles Yoshimoto 166)

This work is play in a literal sense. The musicians “played” music. Ono and her assistants “played” with the musicians. Ono also played with the letters JC, as *Sky Piece for Jesus Christ* was an *homage* to John Cage. In contra-distinction to her other pieces, it seems that Ono wanted people to laugh, thus entering into a liminoid state during the “play.” Laughter, like shared ideology or “feeling terrible,” can create a sense of *communitas* since audience members experience each other as they laugh.

Unlike this piece, most of Ono's other works are more contemplative. *Sky Piece for Jesus Christ* was more tied to conventional music than most of her other works and may have been developed specifically for the Fluxus concert (Yoshimoto 105). Like other Fluxus members, Ono was interested in play, though she focused her intention on creating a shift of perspective for the audience through playful yet contemplative means. Ono felt that these experiences, which she framed as secular rituals, were needed to deal with the contemporary world. She believed that “... it was not enough in life to just wake up in the morning, eat, talk, walk, and go to sleep. Art and music were necessities. But they were not enough, either. We needed new rituals, in order to keep our sanity” (qtd. in Yoshimoto 79). Like later performance groups such as the Taller de Investigación Teatral – Theatre Research Workshop – who were also interested in the use of ritual in industrialized societies, Ono created some works that functioned as secular cultural forms to effect change in participants' belief systems (Middleton 46). Turner maintained that ritual “...actually creates, or

recreates, the categories through which men perceive reality – the axioms underlying the structure of society and the laws of the natural and moral orders” (Turner 6-7).

While performance does not effect permanent change like ritual, Turner recognized its ability to create liminoid states. Works like *Lighting Piece* (discussed in chapter two) had come from Ono’s own practices of creating liminoid states in order to ground herself. While many of her pieces, like *Lighting Piece*, were to be performed individually, she also developed pieces that created a liminoid experience for others. These included pieces like *Sky Piece for Jesus Christ* and *A Piece for Strawberries and Violin/AOS – to David Tutor* (1962). *Strawberries and Violin/AOS* involved performer collaboration and was comprised of a combination of electronic sounds, vocals, instrumental sounds, body movement, and the movement of various objects including a table, chair, toilet bowl, and an assortment of boxes. The structure of the piece lent itself to generating a sense of communitas among the participants and audience. Indeed this work could be considered a type of social praxis, as art historian Kristin Stiles has suggested of other Fluxus works. The term praxis originates from the Greek words for “action” and “doing” and refers to the practice of knowledge. Stiles argues that praxis also suggests the “therapeutic practice of a specific system of agency ... [that] includes actions in public or political life, and acts aimed at the recovery of something” (93). Within this context, then, praxis had the capacity to be rehabilitative.

A Piece for Strawberries and Violin/AOS – to David Tutor had a very loose structure. Participants were given basic instructions but then were left alone to

interpret and perform the work as they saw fit. Academic Deborah Middleton has said that openness "...provides a liminoid context in which new forms, images, identities, and behavioral patterns may be forged. Rather than functioning as a positive induction to new modes of thought or behavior, the dynamic provides experiences through which one might strip away, or learn to refrain from, habitual modes (49). Thus, alternate modes experienced during the performance may find their way into more permanent behavioral changes. Ono wanted to produce a renewed feeling of connection between the participants in her collective works. The week before the November 24, 1961 performance of *A Piece for Strawberries and Violin/AOS – to David Tutor*, Ono "had given instruction to everyone as to what they should do, so that there would be a feeling of togetherness based on alienation, since no one knew the other person's instructions..." (Cott 121). Ono intended for the secrecy of the instructions to generate tension between the performers since they would not be able to predict the other performers' actions.

This piece tries to induce Cold War anxiety generated by the uncertainty of not knowing what the other side's "instructions" were. In the United States, citizens had been programmed to believe that Communism was about world domination. President Dwight D. Eisenhower had articulated the domino theory, stating,

You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences. (383)

There was the belief that some small change could set off a similar change in a near by region. Thus, the United States was instructed to keep the key dominoes (like South Vietnam) from falling. In the Cold War, part of the tension came from the knowledge, as in Ono's piece, that everyone had different instructions and it was impossible to know what anyone else's instructions were. This kind of ambiguity meant that people had to imagine the other's instructions and then prepare a response to (or a pre-emptive strike to prevent) those imagined acts. In the Cold War there was the constant threat of nuclear engagement, and in the United States part of the preparation to deal with this was to practice reacting to nuclear attacks. School children were raised to believe that nuclear war was possible at any moment and based on this potential scenario, children practiced atom-bomb drills.



Fig. 3, Children Practicing Atomic Bomb Drill, movie still from *Atomic Café*, 1982

Ono believed in a sort of domino effect as well:

I think that even one thought that comes alive in a corner of the world affects everybody, even if it's not spoken, even if it's just a thought in somebody's mind, if it's spoken it's much more powerful, we all affect each other in that sense. I definitely think that a lot of things that are done in the art world do affect the world as well, for that reason I'm very careful with what I create. (Dannatt 115)

Ono believed that artistic performance as social practice, could effect change in the performance of everyday life. The bi-polar view of the world during the Cold War

was inherently laden with stresses born of fear and the endurance needed to keep going in an arms race, a space race, and a race for international political influence. Instead of *communitas* originating in the daily ritual of atomic bomb drills, Ono hoped to generate a *communitas* that would shift perspective. The alienation felt in industrialized societies was hard to articulate due to the “stickiness” of its source. By generating anxiety in works like *A Piece for Strawberries and Violin/AOS – to David Tutor*, Ono hoped to generate a liminoid state of *communitas* that could shift perceptions. Unlike the belief espoused by Clement Greenberg in the late 1940s that

Isolation, or rather the alienation that is its cause, is the truth – isolation, alienation, naked and revealed unto itself, is the condition under which the true reality of our age is experienced. And the experience of this true reality is indispensable to any ambitious art (qtd. in Frascina 120),

Ono believed that “ambitious” art was an art that effected social change, not by telling viewers what the reality of their age was, but by giving them the means to experience it for themselves, trusting that those who chose to participate might find their way out of the world of “stickiness” they inhabited.

Conclusion

In the past decade, a handful of emerging art historians have begun to push for the recognition of Yoko Ono as an artistic power in her own right, before and beyond her association with John Lennon. Thus far studies have mostly focused on the feminist and conceptual elements of Ono's work. In addition, a few studies provide a cursory look at the Buddhist influence in Ono's art. Ono's international childhood and life as a young adult is frequently mentioned but there has been nothing published that articulates the relationship of this international backdrop to Ono's work or to her reception in the avant-garde art world of the 1960's.

In this thesis I explore the influence of Ono's Japanese connections to her life and work in the United States. In this first chapter I showed how Ono's Japanese nationality helped her to enter the New York avant-garde art world of the 1960's more easily. This was due to a renewed interest in Japan and Zen in post-World War II America. Ono's presence also served to authenticate the international focus of New York Fluxus. In chapter two, I detailed how Ono's conceptual art contained specific characteristics of Zen aesthetic and philosophy. Her merger of Zen philosophy with the American avant-garde event score form, not only transcended national aesthetic distinctions but provided participants an opportunity to transcend constructions of reality based in logic and the *doxa* of capitalism. Finally, in chapter three I show how some Fluxus works, including Ono's, provided a means to create

spontaneous *communitas*, if only temporarily, thereby allowing people to feel connected with themselves and others instead of feeling alienated by fear.

This thesis begins the work of identifying the role that the dual influences of living in Japan and the United States has played in her life and in her art. This work will be helped by a continued exploration of theories of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism. Theories of transnationalism, developed since the 1980's have proven insufficient for describing the international dynamic of the preceding decades. Most of these theories emerge at a time when globalization had increased the interconnectedness of people and places to an unprecedented degree. Though I choose to use theories that have only been articulated within the past 20 years, further theoretical consideration of the historical differences between current cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitanism of the 1960's, for example, would lead to new and interesting questions. This is also true for theories of transnationalism.

Inderpal Grewal's theory of transnationalism, based on the possibility for frictionless exchange over the internet, provided a basis for understanding how communities can arise through shared discourse, but is not able to satisfy questions of how a geographically dispersed and culturally heterogeneous group of people came to identity themselves as a cohesive group under the name Fluxus in the less technologically advanced 1960s. Nor do modern theories of hybridity serve to bring clarity to Ono's artistic position or personal identity in the early 1960s. Performance artist Gomez Pena, who first began writing about hybridity in the 1990s, is a border artist, who performs his self as both Mexican and American simultaneously whether

he is on the American side of the US/Mexico border, or on the Mexican side. Unlike Pena, Ono did not present herself as all identities at all times. Ono, while recognizing the influence of both Japanese and American culture on her identity and work, strategically choose, like Japanese American artist Isamu Noguchi, which aspect of herself she wanted to use in framing her reception. Both Noguchi and Ono recognized that artistic nationalism (the "aesthetic significance of the work of art (in its creation or reception) according to beliefs about [the] national identity" of the artist) was at play in their reception. Unlike Noguchi, who emphasized the aspect of his identity that would most support the particular national flavor of his work, Ono often juxtaposed her cultural identity against that of the culture she was working in, focusing on her Japanese identity in the United States and her American associations when working in Japan.

While George Maciunas was instrumental in providing a consistent graphic style to Fluxus publications, thereby sidestepping some of the assumptions contained in artistic nationalism, it became apparent through this research that Fluxus artists did not themselves, recognize the degree to which their activities were limited by the international political environment. They only worked in regions that were sanctioned by the American government. Fluxus's conceptual country is a cosmopolitan one, and not as transnational as they desired. Fluxus artist and historian Ken Friedman wrote that Fluxus members welcomed dialogue with like minds regardless of nationality. He continued, stating that the Fluxus view of global participation is democratic and envisions "A world inhabited by individuals of equal

worth and value suggest[ing] – or require[ing] – a method for each individual to fulfill his or her potential.” While the Western industrialized nations and some developing nations are essentially democratic, he states that humanity is far from a global democracy. He further writes that people’s potentials are best filled in “an open or entrepreneurial society in which the opportunity to advance is based on the ability to create value in the form of goods or services.” Thus Friedman ties democracy back to capitalist-oriented development, which provides the economic base to allow artists to cross over geographical borders. Fluxus *is* able to transcend geographical boundaries, yet is *not* able to transcend geo-political ones. This is apparent once you realize that there are no artists from Africa, South America, or even most of Asia active in Fluxus. Members come from industrialized, Westernized, democratized nations. As my work progressed, it also became apparent that just as the Abstract Expressionist movement has been historicized, so too could Fluxus be situated within its historical context and that this might lead to new insights on the transnationalism of this group.

Unlike Fluxus works that sought to transcend the geographic and political boundaries of nations, Ono's focus was on an individual metaphysical transcendence. While Ono’s use of the term “stickiness” applies more to the mental constructions of reality that appear dependent on logic, and Roland Barthes theorizes the term in relation to the manifestation of capitalist ideology in our material world, both uses of the term are a response to the conditions and pressures of the contemporary world. For generations of people living in a world tinged with the fear of mutual destruction,

Ono's works presented a means to question the *doxa* of alienation and provided an opportunity to connect with a slightly different reality, both in relation to the self and in relation to other people.

ILLUSTRATIONS

<i>Figures</i>	<i>Page</i>
1.1 Isamu Noguchi. <i>Monument to the Plough</i> (unrealized). 1933. The Noguchi Museum. http://www.noguchi.org/monplough.htm . Accessed 8/27/07.	28
1.2 Noguchi. <i>Jardin Japonais</i> . 1956-1958. http://www.noguchi.org/unescogard.htm . Accessed 8/27/07.	29
1.3 Yoko Ono. <i>Painting to be Stepped On</i> . 1961. By George Maciunas. Reproduced in exhibition catalog <i>Paintings and Drawings</i> by Yoko Ono. n.p.	37
1.4 Ono with <i>sumi</i> ink drawing. 1961. By George Maciunas. Reproduced in exhibition catalog <i>Paintings and Drawings</i> by Yoko Ono. n.p.	37
1.5 Ono. <i>Cut Piece</i> . 1965. By George Maciunas. From The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection. http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/cut-piece . Accessed 8/27/07.	39
2.1 Ono. <i>Lighting Piece</i> . 1955. By Ysuihiro Yoshioka. Sogetsu Art Center, Tokyo, 1962. Reproduced in Midori Yoshimoto (Into Performance, 2005), p. 83.	64
3.1 Mieko Shiomi. <i>Spatial Poem No. 1</i> . 1966. By Brad Iverson. From The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection. Reproduced in Midori Yoshimoto (Into Performance, 2005), p. 157.	81
3.2 Ono. <i>Sky Piece for Jesus Christ</i> . 1965. By Peter Moore. Reproduced in Midori Yoshimoto (Into Performance, 2005), p. 104.	84
3.3 Schoolchildren lined up for an atom-bomb drill. Official Civil Defense photograph (circa 1958). Used in the film <i>The Atomic Café</i> (1982). Reproduced in eds. Armstrong/Rothfuss (In the Spirit of Flux 1993), p. 151.	90

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